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Vol. 10, No. 3

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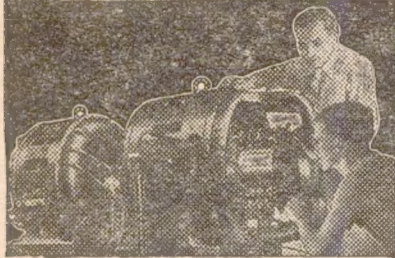
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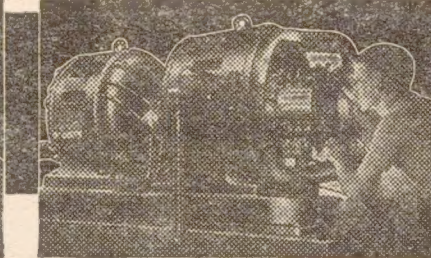
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ROUND-UP

WE NEVER thought that Half-pint, our sawed-off ex-cowboy assistant, owned but one hat—the big, floppy sombrero he'd been wearing since the day he first blew in from New Mexico. But this morning he came sauntering in, little as life, with a flat-crowned black thing on his head that looked like it had been run over by a steam roller. It was all width and no height, and it made him look like a small boy balancing a tray on his head.

"Haw-haw," we laughed. And right away we could see that something serious had taken hold of him. For—instead of getting ornery and sassy, the way the cocky little carrot-top is in the habit of doing when anybody laughs at him—he just nodded, politely dignified, and walked quietly on past our door to the cubby-hole where he is supposed to do his work.

In that fleeting glimpse, we had noticed something beside the flat-crowned black hat. Instead of his usual cowhide vest, blue silk shirt and flashy bandana, he was wearing a slightly moth-eaten frockcoat.

"Hey!" we bellowed, and followed him in.

"Son," he said, solemn as a judge, "yellin' at folks never got nobody nowhere. Like the Good Book says, an empty keg rings the loudest."

Then we noticed the stand-up collar around his neck, with no tie. "Holy cow," we said, "what d'you think you are now? A sky-pilot?"

He smiled benignly—which is one word we had thought could never, by the widest stretching of the imagination, be used in referring to that pocket-size harbinger of trouble. "What a man is," he said, patting the breast pocket of his frockcoat, "lies deep down here. Clothes don't make the man."

"No, and leopards don't change their spots."

He got a little red in the face, and his right hand went inching back toward the bulge at his side, where it looked like he was still wearing his big six-shooter. Then he shrugged, and laughed hollowly. "You really think it looks like a pastor's get-up?" he asked, eyeing us like we'd better say "Yes." Which we did.

"An' this is a free country, ain't it?"

he demanded. "An' a man's still got the right to wear whatever dang clothes he sees fit?"

"Yeah, but—"

Half-pint cut us off with a wave of his hand, which was holding a big roll of papers. "Then," he said, "that bein' settled, I'll tell you about a two-fisted Western gent named Carew. It so happens he rigged himself out somethin' like this, an' folks took him fer a pastor."

"Friend of yours?" we inquired.

He frowned. "In a manner o' speakin', yes," he said. "Well, like I started to say, he rid into a certain hell-spawned Western town, where a friend of his, one George Calvert, was havin' some trouble, just in time to see Calvert and a harmless old codger shot down in cold blood. Bein' decked out in that-there black suit o' his, they figgered he was only a parson, an' therefore nothin' to worry about. So Rud Weymeir, who'd done the killin', just stood an' watched, along with the other gunmen, while Carew squatted in the dust beside his dyin' friend."

"Oh," we said, beginnin' to see the light, "it's a story you read?"

"A story!" Half-pint repeated. "An' what a story! It's one o' the book-length novels yuh're a-goin' to buy fer the next issue! Have a look!"

He thumbed through the roll of papers he was carryin' till he come to the part about the parson-lookin' fellow, Carew, squatting in the dust. "Here!" he said, and we started reading:

A spasm of pain jerked through Calvert's body, and his last breath whispered from his lips. Carew stood up slowly, a cold fire burning in his dark eyes. He was staring across the space toward Rud Weymeir.

A bleak chuckle rumbled from the gunman's

(Concluded on page 8)

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME ?

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(Continued from page 6)

throat. "If you're thinkin' of singing your songs of sin and Satan, pick someone else, parson," he jeered. He sheathed his gun, started to turn away, but the soft menace in Carew's voice halted him.

"There's more than one way of reading a sermon to a polecat like you, Weymeir."

He started forward in loose, stalking strides, the flat coldness of his voice reaching out across the shortening distance and smashing into the gunman. "You baited Charley Benbow into that fight, knowing he didn't stand a chance. You didn't have to kill Calvert, but you did. You murdering, sure-thing killer! I'll give you some scripture you can understand!"

Weymeir's temper turned hot and jumpy; it reddened his eyes and put an ugly throb in his hoarse voice. "A regular hell-twistin', fightin' sky-pilot, huh!" he sneered. "If you want trouble, you'll get all you can take!"

He lunged forward, his fists like hard knobs on the ends of his thick, powerful arms. There was no cunning in Carew's attack; the storm of bitter hatred that raged through him robbed him of that. It put a cold, inexorable wildness in him, showing him on with one bleak desire—to bruise and crush and hurt with all the strength in his long body.

Weymeir lurched in with both fists swinging. A blow sledged against the side of Carew's head and was like an ax chopping into his brain. But it didn't stop him. He kept striding in, his fists slogging out and back, and out again.

They smashed together and locked there a long bruising moment. Weymeir had all the advantage of weight and height. There was the power of a rock-crusher in the man's hard, ropy muscles, and his breath was a hot, gusty wind against Carew's face.

Pain bounced and stabbed through Carew's body under the smashing of the man's fists, but it didn't slow him. He kept moving in, crowding Weymeir back with slashing, shoulder-hurled blows. He saw brute confidence drain from the man's red eyes and turn to a flicker of fear. He ripped solid, battering blows against Weymeir's chin and eyes and middle, finding a savage joy in the dull, fleshy thuds of his fists landing on their marks.

Weymeir jerked up his knee in a vicious, crippling blow, but Carew twisted to one side, closed in again ruthlessly. The gunman's fear changed to terror and panic that drove him at Carew in a wicked lunge. They tripped and crashed into the dust of the street, rolling and wrestling savagely, striking and missing, Weymeir heaving up his hatred in hoarse bursts of breath.

Carew ripped free, shoved to his feet and waited grimly. Weymeir lurched up from the street, panic burning all the fight out of him.

He twisted around and started to run, but Carew said, "Not yet, Weymeir," and caught

the man by the shoulder, spinning him. He smashed a blow into the gunman's middle, and as Weymeir doubled, he straightened him with a left that curved up from his knees. He forced the killer's head back with wicked, chopping blows. He caught the man's shirt with his left hand, and all the bitter fury in him went into his final smash to the shelf of Weymeir's chin.

Weymeir twisted half around under the shock of the blow, a blankness flowing into his rough face. He took a long, blind step, but his leg crumpled under him and he crashed face down in the dust of the street, blood worming from his lips. A shiver shook its way down his big body, and after that he didn't move.

Temper was still slapping around inside Jim Carew when he lifted his eyes from Weymeir's inert body. He knew there were others as cold-blooded and deadly as Weymeir among the men who made a wide ring around him. There was a challenge in the glance he sent skidding across their faces.

"Yeah, I see what you mean," we told Half-pint. "A plumb salty hombre."

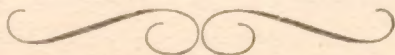
Half-pint always was an impressionable gent, and this Carew hairpin, in his parson's rig, had made an almighty big hit with him. "Like I was sayin', clothes don't make the man," he philosophized. "An' a he-man curly wolf can wear sheep's wool if he so wants."

"Yeah," we admitted. "But where'd you get all these smart-aleck sayings about clothes, and curly wolves, and what the Good Book says, and empty kegs and all? If you want to make yourself over like Carew, that's all right by me. But he don't go around spouting such nonsense."

"Listen," gritted the little fellow between his teeth, and he was now sounding more like his normal self. "Any more cheap cracks about Carew, an' yuh've got me to settle with. Now—" and he flipped back his long black coat and yanked out his six-shooter—"yuh goin' to print that story in April *Big Book Western* or ain't yuh?"

Which left us practically no choice in the matter. C. William Harrison's book-length novel heads the lineup for the next issue. And, for Half-pint's benefit, we might add that the whole thing could have been decided peaceably, in perfect agreement, and *without* gun-play, if he'd let us read it through before losing that red-headed temper of his.

THE EDITOR.





IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

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Death Rides For Satan's Rancho



A book-length
Mexican Border
novel
By HARRY F.
OLMSTED



From Montana's Hole in the Wall to the fortress headquarters of Mexico's Yaqui revolutionists, a pardoned longrider came home to square accounts for his murdered kinsmen—while his feuding owl-hoot saddlemates matched lead and knives and dynamite on the blood-drenched battlements of a Mañanaland civil war!

Sheila hung to the man she had wedded, a soft prayer sighing through her lips.



Chapter I

AN OUTLAW RETURNS

SOUTH of the Mexican Border, but not so far south as El Paso de las Almas Perdidas—the Pass of Lost Souls—a beautiful woman rode up the slope of a small, isolated hill which com-

manded a comprehensive view of Valle de Organo. Under spur and quirt, she sent the great *sangrefino caballo* up to the top, reared him to a stop and stepped from the saddle. She gulped in a deep lungful of air, stretched her lithe body and turned her face toward the break in the rimming cliffs, where day and night rifle-men kept guard.

"One day soon," she cried aloud, "you will go to sleep up there, my watchful one, never to awaken. And before the guard is changed, two people will leave this valley forever. Free! You hear me? Free to enjoy the great happiness!"

She spoke aloud, knowing the words could never reach across the half mile interval to the guard's ears. Even as she looked at that silent, posted figure silhouetted against the skyline, a rider topped the height and found himself immediately covered by the guard. The watching woman could not hear what was said between those two, but she could see the quick flurry of action that followed. She drew her breath with a painful inhalation, brought her hands reflexively to her throat, murmured, "*Dios de mi alma*," and gave her full attention to something she could appreciate if not entirely understand.

First it was the rearing of the rider's horse and the flash of reflected sunlight along the barrel of his swiftly drawn gun. The smoke-spurts of pistol and rifle came simultaneously. The guard spun, reeled over the rim and fell down a murderous slant, a little trail of dust following the cartwheeling of his body. The rider's horse, mortally hit by the guard's bullets, nosedived to the earth, its rider stepping clear with a grace discernible even at that distance.

"*Dios!*" It was like a prayer on the woman's lips. "The way is open for Carlos and me. But Carlos is away. Tell me, *Maria Virgen Santisima*, what I am to do."

Like a person whose brain is drugged with alcohol, she stumbled to her horse,

stirrupped her foot and mounted. Her spurs sang and she sent the pony down the slope at a reckless speed. "I must get home," she kept repeating. "Get home and get ready."

She came to the twin *carreta* track that men called a road, reined sharply and headed back the way she had come. With the animal at full gallop, she ventured to twist in the saddle and look back. She saw the unhorsed rider coming swiftly down the trail from the rim, waving his hat in circles to attract her attention.

Curiosity overcame her. "Anyway, Carlos is away," she told herself. "It can do no harm to see this bold one . . . and maybe use him if the need becomes great."

She reined in, swung around and started back. He stood in the shade of a spreading *aliso*, holding his wide gray hat in one hand, using the other to mop his flushed face with a cerise silk scarf. Laughter danced in his pale blue eyes, twisting his face. He carried himself lance-straight and strongly, like the wild Indios from the Sierras.

The woman halted her horse at the edge of the shade, a little fearful now, of trusting herself with him. She was filled with doubt and embarrassment. She sat with a discreet and prideful silence, admiring the fineness of his dress. The faintest hint of gold braid adorned his velvet *chaquete*. Along the front and at the cuffs of his embroidered shirt was the finest of Cholula lace. His *pantalones*, bell-bottomed and gusseted with crimson silk, were tight across his strong, lean thighs, after the manner of the *charro*. The leather which held his pearl-butted gun was exquisitely tooled, carved and stamped. He wore a large diamond on his finger.

He eyed her with the full savor of one who has no diffidence with women. "Thank you, señorita." His voice was full and deep, with just a trace of a hidden accent, pleasing to her ears. "To walk, for me, is to die the slow death. Do I ride up behind you?"

Or shall I take the saddle and carry the beautiful lady across my lap?"

"Where would you go?" she asked, forcing a coldness into her voice. "Where in all the Organ Valley can there be safety for one who has slain a guard of the powerful Don Roberto Celaya?"

He was amused and he laughed. His mirth ironed away a hardness of visage, as a flash of sunlight tempers the gloomy threat of rain. But behind the laugh lay his puzzlement. "You saw then, señorita? Your eyes are good. He was an ill-natured dog and he asked for what he got. But that look on your face? He meant something to you?"

"No." She hesitated, eyeing him gravely. Then: "Where have I seen you?"

He sobered and his vivid gray eyes held hers. "I have been far and seen many people, señorita. Where could we start to search for the day you might have seen me? Tell me where you have been and I will—"

"I know!" A half smile danced about her mouth. "You are Bawn Lafferty, come back to Organ Valley after all these years. Come back to die before a firing squad."



A GAIN he laughed, this time a little stiffly. "I take lots of killing, señorita, and I have never been one to stand hitched while uniformed monkeys have target practice with me. Bawn Lafferty don't scare easy."

"I know." Her pale eyes glared down at him. "You have been gone a great many years and you never had the decency to write to your old father. But we learned of you and have followed your reckless doings for a long time. Desperado, bank and train robber, gunman, murderer. You called yourself the Merino Kid, but long ago word came that the Merino Kid was really Bawn Lafferty. You were mixed up in that terrible Temosachic affair, and the

Governor of Chihuahua has offered a rich price on your head. Many hereabouts would like to earn that money. Turn around and ride back where you came from."

"Ride?" He grinned at her. "On what? Your pony perhaps?"

"If you wanted it, I have no doubt you'd set me afoot. One so talented as yourself would not be long without a horse. But surely you must know there is nothing for you in Mexico but death."

He chuckled and appeared to study her. If he had found it convenient, he could have told her he had made peace with Mexican law and was free to come and go as he willed, by legal pardon.

"Thanks for your concern about me, lady," he said. "I came here to settle up some business and will leave when and if I finish it."

"Just as stubborn as you used to be, Bawn Lafferty."

"I am little changed. But who are you to know my failings?" He appraised her mouth and eyes, the beauty of her face and body. She frowned a little at his busy glance.

"What I know of you, Bawn Lafferty, I have learned from your cousin, Sheila Gilligan."

"The little tow-head who came over from Ireland, with the smile of a saint and the temper of a devil. I had forgotten Sheila. What of her?"

The woman shook her head. "She is in terrible trouble. If only you could be depended upon to help her! You could do it so easily. But the danger is—"

"Damn the danger! What's her trouble and how can I help her?"

"She now bears the name of a bad man, who swept her off her feet, married her and thus became the *hacendado* at Rancho Potrero Grande. Yes, Roberto Celaya is very cruel to her. All he cares about is her money, which he uses to stir up revolution. A reformed outlaw and bandit, he rules his rancho and this valley with an iron hand.

And plans some day to rule all Mexico in the same way."

"*Hacendado*, you say?" Bawn Lafferty's eyes changed. "I had supposed my brother Patrick had inherited the property after the death of my father."

A transient look of fear shadowed her face and was gone. But her eyes remained wider and she gulped. "Patrick? Oh, hadn't you heard? He fell sick and died . . . months ago. Your cousin inherited the place, and then came the gay Roberto Celaya."

She fell silent, awed by the sudden bleakness in Bawn Lafferty's face, by the unasked questions flashing from his eyes. She threw up her head, paled and said, "If you want to help your cousin, you will find her at Casa Blanca, the great house your father built before you were born. *Adios*."

She brought her quirt down against her pony's flank. The beast leaped into a hard gallop, racing straight down the valley toward Rancho Potrero Grande. And Bawn Lafferty watched her go, more depressed by news of his brother's death than amazed by the woman's sudden departure. Patrick dead! That left Bawn the last of his father's line and the true owner of Casa Blanca and its surrounding cattle empire. Roberto Celaya, eh? A reformed *bandido*, running Rancho Potrero Grande with a high hand, breaking the heart of the woman who had made his good fortune possible. He'd see this fellow and send him packing. . . .

In a haze of deep thought, Bawn commenced the twelve mile walk. A rueful look backward toward the rim, where his dead horse lay, showed him the probable reason for the woman's precipitate departure. Coming down the trail from the mesa top was a cavalcade of riders, kicking up a plume of dust. And, because Bawn was trained to observe such things, he noticed the uniformity of their dress. Charro hats. Crossed *bandaleros*. Blue shirts and brown denim coats. The *carabinas* sheathed and

hung from the high saddle horns. These were rangers of Northern Mexico's desert reaches—the Rurales.

Chapter II

BUSHWHACK TRAIL

THERE was no chance to duck and avoid them. They had spotted Bawn and were coming toward him at a gallop, the leader and the first few riders already on the flats and fanning out to intercept him. So Bawn Lafferty continued on his way with a swinging, leisurely stride, eyes front, back straight, as if there was not a worry on his mind.

They came sweeping in around him—a bronzed *teniente* and his twelve youthful troopers. They curbed their ponies, grinning down at his raiment, which was far too showy for a man afoot in a dusty land.

"*Buenas días, señor*." The officer's courtesy was faultless, for all the arrogance in his dark eyes. "You are walking. May I ask where?"

Bawn could be quite frank with these mounted patrolmen, for he had nothing to fear save perhaps an embarrassing pause while some officious gent verified the truth and authenticity of the pardon he carried in his pocket. So he said, "I'm on my way to Rancho Potrero Grande, to see my good friend Roberto Celaya. I am lost. Will you be good enough to direct me?"

The *teniente's* brows lifted as he reflected upon Bawn's perfect Spanish. He cast a grim glance up toward the rim. "Lost," he repeated cynically. "And hunting Don Roberto, who lives twelve miles down the valley. Who are you, and where is your horse?"

Bawn laughed, despite the virus of worry burdening his chest. "I understand how I must look," he said. "I am a *ranchero* from north of the Line, come down to visit my friend. I get lost and, to make it worse, a masked *bandido* stands me up and makes

off with my horse. I met a woman who might have given me a lift, but she galloped away when she saw you coming. She was frightened."

"You sure the dead horse on the rim is not yours?" scowled the officer.

"Dead horse?" Bawn acted puzzled. "I know of no dead horse."

"Where did you come down?"

"Through yonder slot," lied Bawn. "It was all my life was worth."

"Your name, señor?"

Bawn, tiring of the catechism, studied the colorful arm bands worn by each of these men—red, green and yellow stripes encircling the left arm of each. The colors of the Mexican flag. He had seen many Rurales, but none wearing such insignia. He spoke of it.

"It is the sign being worn by all true patriots these days," the *teniente* explained. "Viva la revolucion! Viva Celaya! Your name?"

"Juan Trefal, and I'm tired of your questions. How far must I walk?"

The *teniente* bowed. "You need not walk, Señor Trefal. One of my men will provide a horse and walk beside you to Casa Blanca. If Roberto Celaya knows you, well and good. If not, *Dios* pity you."

"Let him take my *caballo*," volunteered a villainous looking fellow with tobacco-stained mustaches. "If he tries to escape me . . . well, my pistol is hungry." He patted the gun slowly.

"Bueno," smiled the *teniente*. "Let him keep his gun, Enrique. If he is right, he will not draw it. If he has lied about that guard on the rim, he will die anyway. It adds up to the same. *Adios*."

He led his men away at a gallop, and Enrique dismounted, chuckling slyly. It roiled Bawn's temper. "What's so funny?" he demanded. "Let me in on it."

"You're funny," said Enrique, in unmarred English. "Imagine the old Merino Kid posing as some imaginary grand caballero."

BAWN stared as Enrique whipped off his sombrero, ruffled his unruly hair and covered his mustache with his palm. Then: "Hank Walters!" Bawn cried it gladly, pumping the man's hand. "What you doing here?" He dropped the hand, scowling. "Last I saw of you was at the Roost, when Butch and you and Chihuahua left for Temosachic. Haven't seen Butch since, but I've heard plenty. He's laying for you, Hank."

"I know." The little outlaw who had ridden with Cassidy from the beginning of his lawless career looked sheepish, regretful. "Chihuahua ribbed up a shootin' match an' I fell into it, never knowin' it was Butch on the receivin' end. Never would have knowed, I reckon, except Chihuahua told me as we rode across the mountains an' come here. After that . . . well, I'd made my bed an' had to lie in it. Thought we'd killed Butch. Glad to know he's still alive. Chihuahua turned out surprisin', Merino. You wouldn't believe—"

"I wouldn't believe I'd find Hank Walters in the Rurales," added Bawn.

"Enrique Gualterios," grinned Hank. "One of Chihuahua's personal rangers. It's a revolution, Merino. How about gettin' your feet wet?"

Bawn's eyes widened. "The Chihuahua Kid . . . not Roberto Celaya?"

"The same, an' he's doin' good. First he married the owner of a big ranch down here. It put him in touch with the *ricos* an' he got money from 'em. That bought guns an' ca'tridges, horses an' dynamite. Soon he'll hop Fort Cerritos, an' inside a year he figgers to be in Mexico City. What you doin' here, Merino?" His eyes were bright and his hand was near his gun. "Not stompin' snakes for Butch?"

Bawn shook his head. "No. I'm comin' home, Hank." And when the little outlaw showed his puzzlement: "I'm returning to Casa Blanca. I'm Bawn Lafferty."

"Bawn Lafferty . . . Whee-ew!" Hank whistled. "Chihuahua's expectin' you back

an' is ready for you. He's boss at Casa Blanca now. Married the Señorita Sheila, supposed to be the owner."

"My brother, Patrick, was the owner till he died," said Bawn.

"Your brother . . . humph." Hank grimaced. "That explains why I kept thinkin' I'd knowed him somewheres. Yeah, he was there to greet us. One nice feller. He give Chihuahua money rather than to fuss with him, but—"

"What happened to Pat?" Bawn demanded coldly.

"Dunno. Nobody knows except Chihuahua, an' mebbys a few others. He just turns up missin'. Ugly stories is floatin' around. But don't you get funny ideas, Kid. The place carries too many guns for you."

"Probably does," muttered Bawn. "But I can't lay down on a deal like that. What of my father's friends? Blas Moreno?"

"Condemned by Chihuahua an' shot, over a month ago. Treason, they called it."

"And Odo Hunyali, the writer who lived in the house on the high hill?"

"Killed by a night raiding party. Yaquis headquarters there now. Chihuahua said any man who wrote the vicious stuff Hunyali turned out was bound to get it, sooner or later."

"And what of Don Cariaguileno?" Bawn asked tonelessly. "The old hermit who had his own way of influencing people toward decency and right thinking."

Hank puzzled over that. "Cariaguileno? Oh, Old Hook Nose? Funny, I was with the bunch that rode to his cave, with Chihuahua, who had probably done away with your brother. Chihuahua seemed worried—more worried than I'd ever seen him. One feller an' another had been talkin' about this Hook Nose gent, an' Chihuahua decides to go see him. To learn what the stars held for him, he says, but I figgered different. If Hook Nose could do the things they claimed for him, he could peg Chihuahua with certain murders. I think he

went up yonder to kill old Hook Nose."

"And what happened?"

"He wasn't to home in his cave. Chihuahua tipped everything upside down lookin' for him an' was goin' back to the horses when Hook Nose hailed him from the rocks. Cripes, what a lookin' critter he is. Looks old as the hills themselves, with eyes like God an' a tongue that burns the hide off a man. He told Chihuahua off, named him everything that's bad an' predicted his death on Black Friday, whenever that is."

"Let's go see him," said Bawn Lafferty. Then, noticing Hank's look of fear: "Don't worry. He's a friend of mine. He had great respect for my father, who consulted him frequently. Get into your saddle; I'll ride up behind."



THEY crossed the valley and entered the tumbled hill country. A band of ponies scudded before them, and Bawn set Hank afoot while he chased and caught one. He rigged a hackamore, bestrode it bareback and led the way into timberlands stretching upward to the ridgeback. The way led them to the edge of a yawning, sheer-sided canyon, where Bawn drew rein to search the far side for the Cave of Wisdom.

The cave mouth was hidden by a curtain of greenery, but Hank's whispered, "Yonder he is," located the hermit herding his small band of sheep and goats among the huge stones of the talus. At the same instant, both saw the flash of sunlight flung up at them from directly below. Down there, silent as a sunning lizard, a man lay on a ledge, his full interest on the skinny, almost naked soothsayer across the canyon. This man, upon whose arm was fixed the insignia of Roberto Celaya's rangers, was inching his rifle to bear up Cariaguileno. The ambitious Chihuahua Kid was taking no chance of having his fortune upset by a star-gazer.

Bawn Lafferty did three things, and he did them almost simultaneously. He kicked a potato-size rock off the rim. He holstered. And he drew his gun. Not one of these things alarmed the rifleman nor delayed the shot. The stiff wind carried sound away from him, just as it carried the gunblast to Bawn's ears. Having fired, however, some fear, some premonition perhaps, caused him to whirl and look up. Observing the two horsemen above him, he levered in another shell and took aim.

At that distance, a hundred feet or thereabouts, Bawn could read murder on the

could breed a complete disdain for dangers underfoot such as he showed. Bawn gained the talus, loped across the well-worn trail leading to the Pass of Lost Souls, forded the spirited little stream and raced up the far talus to the broken body of Don Hook Nose.

He found the hermit sitting with his back against a boulder, his head lolling and his fingers laced across his belly. Blood seeped through those fingers, and the sunken eyes were closed. Bawn knelt beside him. "Better lie down, *viejo*. It will be easier and I can better see what that *cabron*

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dark, sly and pointed face. As his pistol slid across the holster lip, Bawn sent fire and lead smashing at the bushwhacker. And behind his apparently careless aim were bitter lessons learned the hard way.

A stream of cold ran through Bawn, a familiar sensation, as he saw those murderous eyes change. An invisible hand wiped the mask of desperation from the weasel face, leaving it dull, lifeless. The rifle dropped. The bushwhacker fell.

Hank broke the pause. "Fast work, Merino. I didn't even get unleathered. . . . Look, Hook Nose is down!"

"We have to get to him," gritted Bawn. "Maybe we'll be in time."

Chapter III

SMOKY CURTAINS DRAWN

BAWN'S familiarity with the country made it possible for him to find and follow the twisting, treacherous goat track into the canyon. Only grim necessity

did to you before I killed him." Lafferty's voice was soft.

"Ah!" The eyes came open and the voice was thin with weariness and pain. "You did not kill that one, my son. He but played dead to save his life. Even now he speeds to Casa Blanca with word. . . . But wait! He is weak. He falls from the horse. Men pick him up—godless men." He paused, breathing hard as Bawn laid him down and placed a wadded scarf against the welling wound. Hit there, Bawn knew, a man had almost no chance. He was thinking that, wondering how best to utilize the old man's last moments, when Cariaguileno began speaking again. His voice was husky but the words were clear.

"It matters not, my son, that I am to die. I was old when your father was born. I am so seldom believed. Faith is priceless. For you I have no patience. You were only trouble to your father, whom I loved. You gave him pain when you left, and you return unchanged, unrepentent. There is nothing for you here. Return to the law-

less land from which you come. You are stubborn. You will return to Casa Blanca."

"To square with Celaya, who I knew as the Chihuahua Kid."

"And so," murmured the hermit, "perhaps justify your existence in the cause of the poor, who pay the cost of selfish men's vanities. At Casa Blanca you shall see your blood and its shame, in secret places. The luck which has sustained you will weaken. The lost souls in the Pass will cackle that you are to join them. But a woman will cheat them, as she will cheat you, as she cheats everything she touches."

"My cousin, *viejo*?"

"Your cousin . . . yes."

"What of the woman, Wise One, who fills out her clothes like an apple does its skin? The one with the daring eyes and the ripe lips?"

Hook Nose grimaced. "Your luck at Casa Blanca lies close to her." His voice grew terribly weak. "As sure as you find her, I see the living dead. I hear the cries of dying men, in the echoes of gunfire. I feel your pain, your fear, when you have shot the last arrow in your quiver of hope. Put no more words into my mouth or I shall spit them back. Carry me to my cave quickly. Seal the entrance with mud . . ." He shuddered, his eyes closed, and a pallor overspread the leathery skin that stretched over his cheek bones. The Wizard of the Cave of Wisdom was dead.

Hank Walters came puffing up, cursing the grade. His eyes lifted. "Dead, eh? At that he didn't die no suddener than the gent that plugged him."

"Wrong, Hank. That one's riding back with the news. Give me a hand with the old man."



PALLOR touched Hank's weathered skin. His lips tightened and he looked longingly northward toward the States, where dodgers named him for

important money. Then, grim-eyed, he helped pack the pitifully light hermit through the screening willows and into the cool dimness of the cave. They laid him upon soft deer skins and covered him with a Mayo blanket, of a pattern long abandoned.

There were many things in Bawn's heart which he couldn't speak. This finality called for some eulogy, some requiem. Well used to death among abandoned men, Bawn found this different. It was as if death had triumphed over eternal life, evil over good, darkness over wisdom. Haltingly, Bawn said: "Goodbye old friend. I know who had this thing done, and I will demand payment."

A whisper sighed through the cave: "Vengeance is bad. It doesn't matter."

Bawn looked one way, Hank another. Neither was toward the thin, still form. Hank barked, "Who said that? Who the hell said that?"

Bawn gulped. "*Quien sabe*, Hank? We just don't know enough. Let's leave him."

Outside, in the filtered sunlight, Bawn closed the wicker door, plastered it with mud as Hook Nose had requested. Then he led the way down to the horses.

When they were mounted, Bawn said, "Take the trail we came down, Hank. Follow the hills, cut into that gap yonder and you'll be at the head of Sonora River. Play it safe."

"Safe?" Hank hooted. "You call that trail safe? Me, I'll take Casa Blanca."

It stirred no argument in Bawn, only the heart-warming sense that comes with the knowledge of a loyal, selfless friendship. Bawn knew Hank Walters was afraid of nothing in this world or the next. This was merely his way of taking sides, placing his loyalty properly. A man can't refuse that sort of thing, nor appraise it. *

They mounted, dropped to the trail and rode toward the valley, Bawn leading, Hank at his flank. They rode in silence. Night and a bitter prospect lay ahead. Sun-

set and the strange words of Cariaguileno lay behind. Very, very far away were those adventures with Butch, Sundance, Long Henry and all those other riders of dim trails. Straight ahead the blood of Lafferty cried out for vengeance. Behind, a dark and awful thing had snuffed out wisdom as well as life. That deed must be avenged.

The words of Don Cariaguileno in any other mouth would have inspired nothing but scorn in Bawn. But his earliest recollections were of the infallibility of prophecy from the *Cueva Sabiduria*—the Cave of Wisdom. Those words came back to him like echoes. Crazy words, patternless and devoid of meaning: "*Luck . . . lies close to her. You will find her. I see living dead; I hear . . . the echoes of red guns. I feel your pain and fear when you have shot the last arrow in the quiver of hope.*"

It all had the ring of high trouble, without anything a man could get his teeth into. Bawn had hoped to learn from Old Hook Nose all about the death of his brother, of what to guard against in his visit to Casa Blanca. What he had received, instead, was quite meaningless and left him in low spirit and grave doubt.

Out of the canyon mouth they swept, at a gallop. And no sooner had they hit the grassy plain of Organ Valley than they caught the flash of the dying sun on silver trappings. Three riders came loping toward them, with the plain intent of intercepting them. They wore colorful uniforms.

Bawn heard Hank draw a swift breath. "Some of Chihuahua's finest," he gasped. "This may be it, Merino."

Bawn said, "Throw your gun on me, like I was your prisoner. And look alive."



THAT'S what the trio of revolutionary officers found when they closed the gap and thudded their horses to a halt. Their hands flashed high. "*Viva la revolucion! Viva Celaya!*"

Hank answered them lustily, adding, "When they think they can escape from Enrique Gualterios they soon learn their mistake."

One of the three sent his horse close, peering at Bawn owlishly. He was a big man, darkly handsome, with keen, snapping black eyes. He wore an automatic pistol of European make, and his uniform hinted at some high rank. "This, then," he hummed, "is the man the *teniente de rangers* told me of? The man he sent you to Casa Blanca to guard? Hmmm, Señor Juan Trefal, wasn't it?"

"*Si, señor.* I will deliver him at the rancho if it takes my life, General."

The high officer sneered. "He still wears his gun. Why?"

"His confidence is admirable," Bawn answered for him. "He has his pride, too."

"A pretty story," sneered the general. "A very pretty yarn. Gualterios, you are a traitorous rascal, and this day's work will cost you a trip to the wall. And you, Señor Juan Trefal, who are really the long missing Bawn Lafferty, you too shall be shot for an attack on a patriot. You might have been believed if I hadn't ridden onto poor Pablo Herrera, where he had fallen from his horse. He told me of the attack you two made upon him in the canyon, far from the road to Casa Blanca. On second thought, Lafferty, I will turn you over to the governor, who will pay good money for you, dead or alive."

"I have a pardon from His Excellency," Bawn said quietly.

"Produce it."

Bawn went through his pockets and a blank look came on his face. "*Por Dios,*" he swore, "I had forgotten. I placed it in the pocket of my saddle."

"And that," broke in Hank, "is the paper the *teniente* took from the dead horse on the rim."

He knew he had spoken badly as soon as the words were out, and could have bitten off his tongue as a laugh broke from the

general's lips. "So! That is what I wanted you to admit. The dead horse was yours. You did kill the sentry on guard there. Now you shall be shot." Calmly he unholstered the big blue automatic, threw it level. "Now, Pepe, disarm the good Señor Juan Trefal and we will take him in."

"You convict me without a trial," protested Bawn.

"There can be no trial for one like you," said the general, darkly. "Hand over your gun to Pepe. And carefully, my fine feathered dandy."

With thumb and forefinger, Bawn lifted his gun from its scabbard. When it was clear of leather, it seemed to jump into his palm and swing toward the high officer. The will to kill flamed in that worthy's eyes an instant before Bawn fired. The general shot once, but the bullet went wild. He doubled over the horn and was finished, blood gushing down his front from a severed jugular.

Instantly his two orderlies went into action, intent upon avenging him. Bawn had no quarrel with them, but they gave him no choice. Bawn killed one, Hank the other. Gun echoes ran into the smothering dusk. The two longriders sat their restless ponies, looking down at the fallen, bloody trio.

"Blood-sweating fools," muttered Bawn.

"Cripes!" Hank breathed. "You killed Celaya's top-ranking general—Carlos Montana. There'll be hell to pay, Merino."

Bawn didn't answer. His attention was on the weak movements of the dying general. The man was pulling off a ring, which he now waved aloft. Bawn dismounted, knelt beside him. Whisperingly, the words came: "Ring . . . for lovely Señora Celaya. My love."

He dropped the ring, a diamond, into Bawn's palm, and died. Bawn rose, turning a bleak visage toward Casa Blanca. Yonder three riderless ponies were scampering for the home corrals, their stirrups swinging wildly.

Chapter IV

FORBIDDEN GROUND

"WHAT," asked Bawn, weighing the big diamond between his fingers, "do you suppose is the idea, Hank?"

Hank coughed, turned his face away. "Talk, mebbly, but they say Señora Celaya has been carryin' on with the general. The Kid didn't seem to notice, or mebbly he don't care. *Quien sabe?*"

Any regret Bawn might have had passed now. The cold fact was he hadn't given Montana a fair shake for his life. Like the rest of the Wild Bunch, he clung to a code, never violating its tenets. Transgressions of that code brought his only pangs of conscience, and they passed in the knowledge Montana had been true to nothing, nobody. His full worry now was with a former saddle-mate—the Chihuahua Kid. That business would not keep. He glanced at the sky.

"Be dark when we hit the rancho, Hank. Let's get on." He swung astride his pony and spurred into a full gallop down the flat slope of the valley. Presently, with Hank holding the pace at his flank, Bawn said, "Celaya's not home, eh?"

"Likely not back yet, Merino. Went down to Ojos Azules to review recruits an' shoot a couple more ranchers as traitors because they won't chip in to the fund."

Bawn snorted. Silence fell between them as the horses kept up the driving pace. The afterglow in the west faded. Night fell, with no moon, and a heavy mist dimming the starglow. Yonder, on the Hunyali hilltop, Yaqui fires winked like fireflies, where savage fighters made mockery of the statesmen, soldiers and dreamers who had come to this shrine of art to leave their marks on its friendly walls.

Northward were other lights, marking the site of Casa Blanca, headquarters of a man who had learned his violent calling

from Butch Cassidy and has paid off, like Judas, with treachery bought for a few pieces of silver.

Avoiding the main *insurrecto* camp, Bawn and Hank came presently to where the low white façade of Casa Blanca showed wanly through the light. They tied their ponies in a barranca and crept up behind the big barn.

"I don't like it, Merino," whispered Hank.

"Like what?"

"This silence. No music from the camp. No voices. Even the fires have gone out. They're layin' for us, pardner."

Bawn felt it too, a tension as of men listening, waiting, poised to kill—the impact of the mob urge, every man thinking the same ugly thought, was a force against his nerves.

"Sit tight," he whispered. "I'll scout around a bit." He crawled under the corral fence and was swallowed by the night.

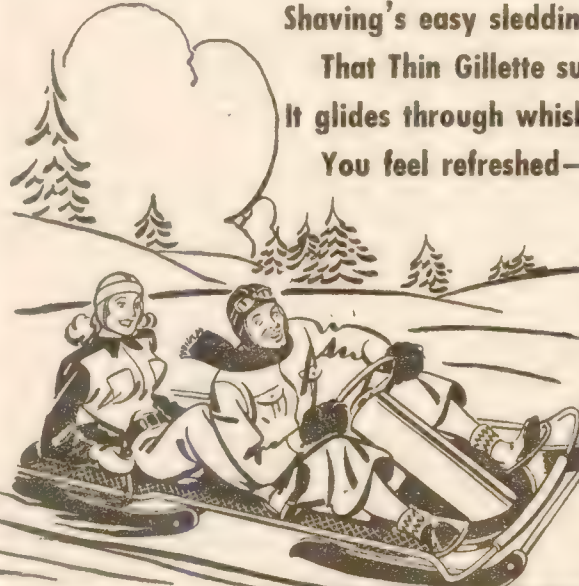
Hank swore softly. "Sit tight? Cripes! That gent's gonna jump up trouble, an' when he does I aim to be close enough to help him." He circled the barn, moving toward the camp, probing for the answer to the silence.



A FLICKERING light, moving across one of the recessed windows of the great house, halted Bawn Lafferty. His heart beat fast as he recalled the prophecy of Don Hook Nose. The faint light crossed the pane, vanished. The house was dark, quiet, dead.

Gritting his teeth, Bawn slid toward the door, his gun ready. Somewhere a high scream lifted. Bawn heard the mutter of voices at the camp, a muffled challenge ringing out, the words indistinguishable because of the distance. Then came a pistol shot. Bawn froze, his heart skipping a beat.

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Another, louder wave of mutterings swept across the rancho and then subsided. It came from the direction of the encampment and was more than a little reassuring to Bawn. It served to dispel the feeling of menace in the night's silence.

Now Bawn tried the great, many-paneled door, carved by a Mexican craftsman long before Bawn was born. He was surprised to find it unlocked. He lifted the heavy, hand-forged latch, swung it open on its rawhide hinges, made silent with steer fat, and stepped into the long corridor leading to the enclosed patio. The door closed without sound, and Bawn was in absolute darkness. That didn't bother him. He knew every square foot of this great house.

He took a step, then whirled back as something clicked behind him. He reached for the latch, found it immovable, caught on the outside. The faint sound of a step came through the panel, followed by a shrill whistle. "A trap," gritted Bawn, and cursed himself. "I knew it was, yet I stuck my head right into it. Well . . ."

He flung about, expecting a rush of men in answer to that whistled signal. There was none. Bawn moved like a shadow down that black corridor, his gun leveled at his hip, the hammer eared back. His left hand brushed the plastered wall, pausing at a closed panel. But even as he felt for the latch, the door gave inward and a soft hiss stung his ears.

"Hist! In here. They're coming. Quick."

He could hear the soft pulse of excited breathing, felt that the call was intended for him. Yet he hesitated. He had a gun and a way with it, as they well knew. How better to trap him without cost than to lure him into a cul-de-sac, such as this room was?

Somewhere in the patio, a door opened, and Bawn heard the low rumble of voices, a bawdy laugh, the clink of glassware and slap of cards. Somebody said, "Nice night. Hope it's as nice when we hit Fort Ceritos."

"Nice and bloody for the Federales," came the answer, and a drunken laugh went up.

But underneath these noises from the little gambling room in the court, Bawn caught a more menacing if less obvious sound. Almost silent feet were treading the tiles of the corridor. Probably some prowling Indio, with a long knife and orders to kill. Caught between two threats, Bawn chose the one closest at hand. It held at least a chance of coming off without a fight. This one who had called to him was a woman, and it was possible that no men lay waiting in the darkened room?

"Hurry!" the whisper urged him. "You are in terrible danger."

Bawn stepped through the narrow opening, feeling a presence retreat before him. He closed the door, dropped the bar. The faint aroma of a delicate perfume reached him.

"Do you see in the dark, señorita?" he asked.

"I knew you would come, and they knew it too."

"And they are?"

"Friends of the master and mistress of this house. Men who have been taught to lose no love for Bawn Lafferty."

"I walked into a trap," said Bawn. "How do I know this isn't part of it?"

"It might be," came the confession, "if the mistress had no use for you. You are now in her service, or you are a dead man. Come. Give me your hand."



HER fingers found his, and they were cold, trembling. She pulled him across the wide room, rolled a door back, pulled him through and locked the panel behind them. She struck a match, touched it to a candle. Bawn was looking again at the woman who had stopped to question him, below the rim, and had ridden away.

Her wealth of hair, so black it looked purple, fell in a bushy cascade to her waist. She wore a filmy, silken thing that added to her allure. Yet Bawn, trained to look for more than rouge and perfume and negligee in women, noticed that she wore her riding boots instead of slippers, that there was an air of expectant readiness about her.

"All right," he said, matter of factly, "I'm in your mistress' service. What's to do? Does she want me to widow her?"

The woman paled. "You have great confidence, Bawn Lafferty, to think you can murder Roberto Celaya under the noses of his bodyguards. If you could . . ." Her lips parted and fires burned deep in her blue eyes. A sigh shook her. "If only you could . . ."

"Murder," he said darkly, "is a word I don't like. When I kill a man it is for a just cause, not for a woman's whim. And I give a man his chance, which makes it anything else but murder. Take me to this bloodthirsty cousin of mine. Let me talk to her."

"You'll have to talk to her through me," she said, and her jaw set stubbornly. "With Roberto Celaya dead, you will be able to press your claim as heir of the Rancho Potrero Grande. Isn't that cause enough—to kill the man who killed your brother and took what is rightly yours?"

"Maybe," said Bawn. "Maybe not. Take me to Sheila."

"No. I cannot do that."

"Then fetch her here," said Bawn. "And while you're at it give her this." He drew the ring from his pocket. "Tell her the general sent it, with all his love."

The strange, beautiful young woman looked at the bauble, caught her breath and turned pale as a corpse. Bawn, watching her carefully, thought her about to faint and took a quick step toward her. She snatched the ring and recoiled from him. Her eyes became luminous pools of flame, like a cat's.

In a low, awful voice, she said, "What—

what are you trying to tell me, Bawn Lafferty?"

"General Carlos Montana stopped me on the trail to *El Paso de las Almas Perdidas*, little over an hour ago. How he knew me, I do not know, but knowing me he insisted upon exerting the authority of a general. All I wanted was to be let alone, but he wouldn't have it that way."

"He's—"

"Dead. I have no complaint against his courage. Only his arrogance."

She muffled a low cry by placing her hand over her lips. Tears spurted onto her cheeks, and her eyes were on Bawn, condemningly. "You—you talk of disliking murder," she said between her teeth. "You killed him, the best man that ever lived. Fool that I was, asking a lawless creature like you here to help me get free from that beast Celaya."

"Ah-ha!" Bawn's lips tightened. "You give yourself away, my cousin. I had my suspicions and knew you would betray yourself if I gave you enough rope. I'm not surprised that you were ashamed to tell who you are. There are some things a wife may not do without a calloused conscience gagging." He smiled. "Forgive me. I have no right to judge you."

That change broke her completely. She stumbled against the door, buried her face on her arms and sobbed. Presently she raised reddened eyes to him. There was hatred in her glance, not forgiveness. Slowly the bitterness ebbed. "What a pity you had to kill a great, good man," she sighed, "when an equal effort would have rid the earth of a fiend. You have taken all I lived for, God forgive you. I can stand this awful place no longer. Will you help me escape?"

"Sure I will, Sheila. How can I help you?"

"By guarding me until I get free of Celaya's vengeance. Wait here a few minutes. I have loyal friends among the servants. I want to arrange for a horse and the

few things I'll need." She blew out the light, let herself out into utter darkness.

Chapter V

TREACHERY!

WHILE Bawn waited for Sheila to return, his thoughts dwelt, with growing scorn, on the part General Montana had played. Montana had influenced her to a point where she wanted her husband slain, yet he had been unwilling to undertake it himself. Perhaps he even had dreamed of usurping Celaya's place in the insurrection.

Now Bawn heard the woman coming back. She came through the door and he could smell the perfume of her. She whispered his name. "Bawn! Here's bread and meat and wine. You'd better eat while you can. My things will be here in a few minutes."

Bawn was ravenous, not having eaten since dawn. The food was delicious and he ate voraciously, washing down great gulps with pulls at the wine bottle. He was draining that bottle before he thought of anything wrong. Then his stomach suddenly turned over and nausea hit him. His legs grew weak, as when the heart misses a beat. The bottle clattered on the flagstones.

Sheila touched him. "What's wrong, cousin? Don't feel very well? Too bad. Don't worry, it will pass off . . ."

"You she-devil!" He hurled her away from him, the effort costing him the last of his strength. He slipped to his knees, his eyes burning like fire, his head throbbing fiercely.

He heard heavy steps coming through the darkness and tried to jerk his gun. Then they came through the door and fell upon him like wolves. He got his gun out of leather but it was wrenched from his hand.

They pounded him mercilessly. Shock ran along his body. He tasted his own

blood. His head was bursting and his heart seemed trying to kick through his chest wall. His brain said "fight," but the wires were down. He ceased to struggle. A dreadful lassitude gripped him. Then he was falling, falling into a black and bottomless pit. . . .

The black curtains rolled slowly up, and brilliant light stabbed Bawn's brain. He grew conscious of a nasty taste, of misery and helplessness. Recollection came flooding back to him. Sheila had betrayed him, of course. Hook Nose had said, "The faithless woman will cheat you as she cheats everything she touches."

The light grew clearer, not a brilliant light at all, but a soot-fouled lantern. Behind it was a pinched face ringed by a fringe of white hair, a down-curved mouth, button nose and batwing ears. Wide eyes filled with fear and pity.

"Chilito!" murmured Bawn, his mind taken back to childhood days and the mozo who had taught him Spanish and the principles of horseback riding. "I'm dreaming."

"Not dreaming, Little Bandy Legs. But I should not call you that, now that you are a man . . . and the true *patron*. Evil times fall upon us here and I am sorry you came." The pinched face looked even more lugubrious, and tears rolled down the sere cheeks.

Bawn came to a sitting posture, shaking away the cobwebs from his brain. "Don't worry, Chilito. Got water?"

"And food, *patron*."

He passed in a jug, and Bawn drenched the fever within him. The food he couldn't touch.

The mozo said, "I must go now, but I will be back. Trust me, *patron*. *Adios*."

Bawn listened till his steps faded out, then kept listening for others. Hearing none, he gave way to bitter self recrimination. "I played the fool," he muttered. "A crazy, trusting fool. Should have listened to Hank." He felt the iron bars. "Now I'm

rotting behind bars that my dad built to hold renegades for the law officers in far away Santa Clara. Bet dad's turning over in his grave now. I wonder if he'd have built it as stout if he'd known his own son would be thrown in here. Well, once I get out of this rat trap . . ." An unlovely chuckle fell across his lips.

He made a search of his pockets. They had taken everything except a dull pocket knife and a sack of tobacco. He wanted a smoke, desperately, but there was no match. Why hadn't he asked Chilito for one? He wondered what Hank Walters was thinking, down there by the barn, and what the stringy little outlaw would do when he failed to show up.



THIS black cell, nothing more than a barred closet with an inch-wide slot cut near the ceiling for ventilation, was floored with flagstones, like the rest of the house. The walls were of adobe, three feet thick and hardened with fifty years of curing. The only furnishings were a husk tick and a pair of musty blankets. Yet even they were to serve him, to cover all sign of his work and permit him to feign sleep if anybody came.

First he removed a flagstone against the inner, unbarred wall. He wanted to get into the house, not outside it. He broke a knife blade lifting out the stone, opened another and attacked the wall, low down. Some time later he broke the second blade. He lost all track of time. He sweated copiously and it did him good, leeching out the last effects of the potion he had drunk with the wine. When dawn came filtering through the ventilator, he had a thin layer of dirt spread out and covered with his tick. And when he heard somebody coming, he rolled against the wall to hide the scar. It was Chilito, with meat, bread and hot coffee.

Bawn would have talked with the old servant, but he was met with a quick roll-

ing of the eyes and a jerk of the head to indicate danger beyond the door. A moment after the mozo departed with the dishes, Sheila Gilligan Celaya came in. Her face was grim, her eyes penitent.

"I'm as sorry as I can be," she murmured, "that it turned out this way, Bawn."

"You must be," he said drily, without rising from his pallet. "After your tall tale of a cruel husband and a determination to escape. We tend to trust our kinsmen, us Laffertys, and that is why I would have fought to help you. But your methods are very crude, my dear cousin. Very crude."

"I don't blame you for reviling me," she said, "after what happened last night. And there is not time to go into details. Can't you still try to believe in me, Bawn?"

"Not on a stack of Bibles. If you've got any further plans for me, just forget them. I'm not one to be kicked twice in the same place. And I find it very congenial here, when I'm alone. Goodbye."

She glared at him, tapping her foot angrily against the flagstones. "Don't you know, Bawn Lafferty, that I'm keeping you alive right now?"

"What for?"

"My ideas haven't changed, Bawn. I intend to be free from Roberto, and there is only the one way. Isn't it a small price to pay for your freedom?"

"If you'd kill him to end a marriage," he said tartly, "you'd hire me killed to acquire full ownership of Potrero Grande. No, I want no traffic with you, no promises asked or given. If you mean business, unlock these bars and stick a loaded six-shooter into my hand."

"I don't trust you that far."

"Nor anybody else, Sheila. You're crooked and no good. Go away and let me alone." He turned his face to the wall.

The woman spoke in a changed voice. "All right, boys. Open up and take him to the master."

Two servants, burly fellows, came burst-

ing into the cell, and Bawn got up to be ready for them. But there was no chance. They carried pistols, cocked and ready. They unlocked the door and motioned him out.

Bawn was marched between them into the long main *sala*—the great room which was his chief memory of Casa Blanca. It had not changed. It was clean and cool and awesome, even as it had been in his boyhood. It was ornately furnished with hand-carved pieces done by some long-dead artisan: relics of Mexican frontier days, priceless hangings and tapestries, paintings of stern-eyed men in powdered wigs, some of his Irish ancestors.

Behind a massive table sat three men in flashy uniforms, their heads close together, the smoke of their cigarettes rising into a single plume. Their low talk fell away as Sheila entered, with the guards following with their prisoner.



THE men at the table came to their feet, two of them falling back, the third swaying forward to stare, his fingers braced on the table top. The silence that settled was grounded in the utter amazement of Roberto Celaya.

"*Por Dios!*" he exclaimed, then suddenly raucous laughter was pouring from him. "And so this is the bold one who has upset the *hacienda*, who has brought us death and halted the revolution? Bawn Lafferty, indeed! My dear, do you know who this man is?"

"I know he is my cousin," Sheila said coldly. "Who do you think he is?"

"I know who he is, this Merino Kid. Too well do I know him, from having ridden with him on a dozen profitable forays. Bawn Lafferty, nonsense! Merino, I knew some of the boys would be after me following the affair at Temosachic, but I never thought of you getting serious enough to avenge anybody."

"No more than I would have thought of the Chihuahua Kid forgetting himself and his selfishness long enough to lead a movement to liberate the poor, down-trodden peon," answered Bawn, with thinly concealed sarcasm. "That beats me."

Celaya scowled. "That name—let it never again be spoken between us. Why are you here?"

"This is my home. Why shouldn't I come here?"

"You still intend to cling to the myth that you are the heir to Potrero Grande, eh? Very good, you are Bawn Lafferty. You came home to secure the fortune of your father, which was never found after his death. Where is it?"

"Don't waste your time," said Bawn. "I know when to keep my mouth shut."

"That money will serve a part in the revolution," said Celaya. "Will you remain silent even if it means your death?"

"I don't scare easy, Chihuahua. You know that."

Fury touched Celaya. He turned to one of his fellow conspirators. It was the *teniente* of revolutionary rangers who had sent Bawn to the rancho in the custody of Hank Walters. "Is this the man, Porfirio?"

"*Sí, señor*. He called himself Juan Trefal. He was afoot, hardly a quarter mile from the dead horse which had the pardon in the saddle pocket."

"Trefal . . . Trefal . . . hmm." Celaya stroked his slender mustaches, and his yellow-bordered eyes fixed Bawn with a look of wicked, mocking triumph. "Pretty near Lafferty backward, no? Maybe I have been wrong, my friend, about who you were before Butch Cassidy got you. Maybe my lovely wife is right. You have murdered my guard. You doubtless killed one of my best officers and two of his men, whose bodies have just been brought in. You know the price of murder?"

"I know about how you'd look at it, Chihuahua."

"You can save yourself by revealing the

location of the treasure you came here for. Will you take the only chance you've got?"

"No. I couldn't trust you to carry out your end."

"Then there is a treasure. Sheila, he practically admits it. Merino, my wild Yaquis know many sure ways of loosening a frozen tongue and a locked jaw. They have excellent cures for stubbornness."

"You're wasting your time," said Bawn. "I'm not scared of death, even the way a Yaqui serves it."

"Very well." Celaya waved his arm. "You condemn yourself. My Yaquis will make a public spectacle of you at the Good Friday fiesta. Take him back and guard him well."

Chapter VI

ESCAPE

THE day dragged for Bawn Lafferty. He dared not dig, because the door to the cell was open and a guard occasionally made his presence known, down the corridor. He had nothing to do but nap and think. His sleep, such as he got, was troubled and unrestful. His thoughts were ugly.

Good Friday fiesta, Celaya had said. That reminded Bawn of what Hank had told him. Cariaguileno, according to the bandy-legged little outlaw, had foretold Celaya's death on Good Friday.

"When is Good Friday, Chilito?" he asked Chilito when he brought the mid-day meal.

The old mozo looked nervously at the doorway. "Day after tomorrow, master. You—you have been to see that—that man. What did he say? What will he do?"

"He turns me over to the Yaquis, come the fiesta, old friend. You will have a show."

"*Dios no quiera.*" Chilito crossed himself. "God forbid! Two men to be tortured to death in the same foul ceremony! What

fiends these people are! What fiends. . . ."

"Who's the other one marked for slaughter?"

"One called Enrique Gualterios, one of Celaya's rangers who was caught skulking about the encampment. He is accused of treachery to the cause and helping to murder General Carlos Montana. If Celaya knew what the rest of us know, he would thank the man who killed Montana. Go with God, my son."

The guard was stirring in the corridor, so Chilito gathered up the empty dishes and hurried out. Behind him he left a heavy knife used for chopping meat for the *chili con carne*, a knife entirely out of place in the serving of a light lunch to an imprisoned man. Bawn scooped it under the blanket just as the guard came to look into the cell. His heart in his mouth lest the man had seen the action, Bawn borrowed a cigarette from the uniformed, bare-footed *paisano*, chatted with him long enough to learn he was a simpleton, then curled up and went to sleep. It was nightfall when he woke up.

The evening meal was served by another servant, one who proved to be stone deaf. And Bawn worried about Chilito. Maybe the guard had listened, overheard the old mozo's talk. If so there might be three bodies for the Yaquis to play with on Friday.

Total blackness came to the corridor finally, and the guard's snores filtered faintly into the cell. Not until then did Bawn attack the wall again. It was quite a different problem with this sharp, heavy digging tool. He worked feverishly, muffling the noise of his efforts with a monotonous humming which served also to lull the sentry into deeper sleep.

"What can I do when I do escape the cell?"

Bawn Lafferty asked himself the question, over and over again. A score of crazy ideas came to him, to be instantly rejected. Steal a horse and seek help at the nearest

Federal outpost. Quietly take over the house and fort up, making a dog-eat-dog fight of it until blasted out by force of numbers. Secure Celaya, using him as a shield in leaving the Organ Valley, kidnaping the leader and robbing the revolt of its moving force. Every idea that crossed his mind remained incomplete, unsatisfying as to some angle or other.

Questions and more questions. And the only answer, *quien sabe*—who knows? He let nothing of the turmoil of his mind interfere with the frantic haste of his digging. He had a two-foot hole in the wall now, and the die was cast. Anyone making an investigation now must surely discover the thing that had been done.

Two feet in. As far to go, perhaps. And then a sob shook Bawn. His blade had struck something hard and snapped. The wall was in reality two walls, with upright flagstones between. Shamus Lafferty had thought far ahead in building his house, as might be expected of a soldier of fortune and adventurer whose life had so often hung upon a slender thread.

Up until now Bawn had dug with a fury that took little account of odds, risks or eventual costs. Now weary, wet with sweat, his hands blistered, he lay there like a stricken man, blanking his mind to his bitter disappointment. The dark hours were half spent, and he must complete his work tonight. Tomorrow the digging would be discovered. If he should be in the cell at the time, his last hope would have fled.

Again the words of Cariaguileno came to his ears like a thin echo: "When you have shot the last arrow in your quiver of hope . . ." And Hank Walters saying, "I know you ain't got one thin streak of yellow in your whole carcass, Merino, but . . ."

Bawn came to his knees, angrily dashing sweat from his eyes. "Damn near forgot a man's got to play his string clear out, didn't you, boy? Almost turned quitter. Got to take that stone out of there, that's all. Then on through into the next room

and God help the man, Yaqui or white, that gets in my road. Let's go, Kid."

The knife was useless, but Bawn had his spurs. They made pretty good digging tools. He tunneled around the end of that particular flagstone, made a finger hole behind it and put his weight against it. The stuff was laminated sandstone and it broke readily. Using the broken knife blade, with handle attached, as a pry, he chipped the stuff away. Half an hour later he was attacking the adobe wall again, ashamed of his moment of weakness.

Bawn forgot the guard, the open door, everything but the job before him. And so the sleeping sentry was awakened and moved to investigate.



B A W N saw the reflection of the approaching lantern, hurriedly stuffed a blanket in the hole, stretched out on the tick and commenced to mumble and kick his heels against the wall.

The thick-skulled *paisano* came in, holding the lantern high. "Hola! What goes on in here?"

Bawn started up, shrinking back against the scarred wall. His eyes blinked stupidly, like those of a man freshly awakened. "*Pesadilla!*" he muttered. "The nightmare. *Dios*, I thought the Yaquis were sticking hot knives into me. It was awful."

The guard laughed and turned away. "Now there," he flung back, "is a dream that will surely come true. Next time try not to make so much noise. It interferes with my sleep."

Bawn lay there trembling until he heard the fellow snoring again. He did not soon get over that scare. Some time later, when the three-foot mark had been passed, and dawn could not be more than an hour and a half away, Bawn stopped to rest his aching muscles and torn hands. He heard low voices coming from the corridor, the tinkle of glassware and the gurgle of

liquid. The sound was a torture to him, more so when the faint aroma of wine came filtering to his nostrils. Nothing more happened, but some presentiment caused Bawn to withhold his digging.

The tone of the guard's snoring deepened. The light seemed to burn itself out.

Through the darkness came a faint whisper: "Bawn!"

"Sheila. What do you want now?"

"Believe me, I have tried to get a key to this cell," she said, her voice heavy with regret. "This guard has none; I drugged the fool to see. I cannot find who has it. I want to get you out of here. I must get you out."

"You put me in here," Bawn said softly. "Why should you want me out, except to lead me into an assassin's knife maybe?"

"I was a fool," she said. "I hated you for killing the only man I ever really loved. But it was certain that if you and Carlos met, one of you would die; I realize it now. Everything hinges on your getting out of here and killing Celaya and those who guard him."

"What a loving wife you are, Sheila."

"Love! Does a woman love a beast, a coyote, a rattlesnake? I could make you understand if I showed you the scars on my back. I had no choice but to marry him . . . or to die. I chose life, maybe not wisely. Carlos would have rescued me, even though it meant betraying Celaya, whom he admired for his genius. Celaya is mad.

When he is quite ready, when the right woman shows him her face, he will cut my throat. Before that time is here, he must die. Give me your hand. . . ."

She caught his extended palm, pressed a kiss into the sweaty, grimy blisters, then closed his fingers around the grip of a gun. "I heard your nightmare excuse," she said, "just as I heard the noises you were making. If you cannot finish the tunnel, use this when breakfast is served. I believe the man will have a key. If not, you will at least save yourself from the torture planned for you. If you get out, three knocks on the door of the room that was your mother's. I will slip down the hall to your father's room, where Celaya sleeps. They will unlock for me, that I may go to his bed. You follow and—and kill him. There will be a horse outside my window. Adios . . . and may the Virgin Mary aid you."

She was gone, and the feel of the six-shooter was like the hand grip of an old friend. But so little faith did he have in this cousin of his he punched the shells from the cylinder, one by one, shook them to verify the powder and tested the leads to see if they had been removed and replaced over sand perhaps. As far as he could tell, everything about the gun, from the loads to the firing pin, was all right. His hand shook as he pocketed the piece and attacked the wall again. One hour later he crawled through the hole he had burrowed into the chamber beyond. He could have



shouted with joy, but somebody was asleep in the room. Somebody snored lustily.

Bawn crept toward the sound, his gun gripped. A chair was silhouetted against a window, with clothing draped over it. From the sleeper's coat pocket Bawn took matches, struck one as he stood erect. First he noted that the clothing was of a smart military cut. Second he looked for and found the weapon—a deadly Mauser holster piece hung over a bedpost. Next he eyed the sleeper—a full bodied man with a moon face and fiercely bristling mustaches.

Even as Bawn looked at the man, he awoke, rolled to one elbow with a heavy, sleep-drugged look of stupidity. His jaw sagged open, fear touched his eyes. He groped for the gun and gathered his forces to utter a roar of alarm.

Bawn struck him alongside the head. Nor did he withhold anything from the blow. His project now was to clean out this nest of revolutionary rats who had spilled Lafferty blood and taken over Potrero Grande. This one collapsed soundlessly upon the bed, and blood bubbled in his breathing.

Chapter VII

LIVING DEAD

SOMEWHERE in the room a clock ticked away the seconds as Bawn stood listening, intent upon learning whether the dull *crack* of steel against bone had been heard. For perhaps five minutes he stood thus. Then, having heard no hint of alarm, he strapped on the heavy Mauser. It was a weapon he had learned to use, because the Chihuahua Kid had carried one on longrider forays, despite the ridicule of his saddlemates.

Silently, Bawn let himself into the main corridor of Casa Blanca. To his left the drugged guard snored in an ell, just off the hall. All was black down that way. To

Bawn's right, maybe a hundred feet away, a faint glow of starlight—or dawn—struck through from the main *sala*. That glow permitted him a glimpse of the entire passageway. There was no guard in sight. Treading lightly, Bawn moved toward the front of the house.

For a long moment he paused before the door of the room which had belonged to his mother, whom he could only dimly remember—the mother who reposed out yonder in the iron-fenced plot under the weeping willows. Sheila lay in there now, listening, waiting for the signal. The thing she wanted done had to be done, but Bawn considered the time and found it not yet ripe. He passed on, pausing again at the next door, which led to the master bedroom where Roberto Celaya slept. The Chihuahua Kid, resting his head in the four-poster bed of Shamus Lafferty. Bawn chuckled acridly and went on.

At the end of the corridor, where it gave into the main *sala*, Bawn paused. A quick scrutiny showed the big reception room to be empty. It showed also that dawn had cracked. He would have to hurry. The great house would soon be astir.

On tiptoe, he raced across the beautifully patterned mosaic floor to the east wall. His breath was coming fast, his heart beating swiftly as he tried the door. It gave to his hand and he slipped into the room that had been Shamus Lafferty's office. Here many a profitable business deal had been cooked up. Here a Central American revolution had been planned and financed, and from this room it had been driven to success. Here Shamus Lafferty had lain in state, after his death, with thousands of persons passing his bier and paying him their last respects. The spell of the place was like a living flame against Bawn's flesh as he closed the door behind him.

For a minute or so Bawn stood trembling under that spell. Then a sigh crossed his lips and he resolutely put thoughts of his dead kinsmen behind him. The pallid dawn

light, seeping in through the window which looked out upon the fountained patio, gave an eerie touch to the hunting trophies hung upon the walls—game and weapons collected from all over the world. It touched the bookcase which filled one end of the room—a case jammed with rare volumes, some bearing the author's imprint of Shamus Lafferty, Soldier of Fortune.

Bawn braced himself for disappointment. It seemed quite impossible that Shamus Lafferty's secret vault could have gone undiscovered, with these loot-hungry buzzards occupying the house, yet . . .

Bawn slid up to that bookcase with conscious reluctance, withdrew a book on the fourth shelf up, ran his hand into the corner and pressed a button there. Something clicked metallically. He caught the moulding of the case and tugged. On silent bearings the whole case swung out from the opposite corner, revealing an opening behind, with a staircase leading down. Bawn stepped through, pulled the case shut again. Something clicked and he was carefully letting himself down the stairs.



THE air was fresh and clean and the splash of falling water was loud in his ears. Somewhere ahead a dim lamp cast a rectangle of light through a doorway and into the narrow passageway. At the foot of the stairs, Bawn halted, regarding that light and toying with the hammer of his pistol. Hearing nothing, he went ahead covertly, never pausing until he stood in the doorway, sweeping this only lighted one of several box-like rooms with a restless glance.

In a carved and upholstered chair, close to the table, the light and the remains of a half eaten meal, sat a man with snow-white hair and beard, a blanket tucked neatly around his legs and a bright *serape* thrown about his shoulders. The face, pale and set as if cast in wax, was turned toward Bawn,

but the eyes were closed and, from the almost imperceptible breathing, Bawn knew the man was asleep. He was alive, that was certain, though by all the signs he was a corpse.

His presence here made no sense. Bawn stepped back, deeply puzzled. Down the corridor a ways, daylight filtered through curtains of spray which fell into a concrete basin. Dimly Bawn could see the ladder reaching up through that spray, resting against a round pillar which seemed to hold up the ceiling but which only held the central bowl of the patio fountain. That central bowl overflowed into a half submerged pool, which was really a circular trough filled with water. The overflow hid the space between that trough and the pillar. That space had been the life insurance policy of a man beset by ruthless enemies who finally killed him from afar off, with a telescope sight and a bullet of cowardice.

Bawn brought his glance back to the sleeping man. He gave a start. The eyes were open, pit black eyes, frightening in their contrast with the waxy skin. They bored into Bawn with an intensity that seemed to sear his soul.

Bawn shook off the dragging inertia of that stare. "I don't know who you are or why you're down here," he said. "I don't suppose you like having me here any better than I like having you. I warn you not to lift your voice. Keep quiet and you won't get hurt."

The black eyes, unwinking and cruelly direct, glittered, but the lips remained silent. Moments dragged out.

"Not talking, eh?" Bawn said. He reached out and tore the covering from the man's legs. He had believed the hands hidden under the blanket might be holding a gun. They were not. Thin, transparently white, they lay inert in his lap, devoid of power, useless.

Under the stare of this silent man, cynical, bitter and terribly condemnatory, Bawn flushed with shame. "My mistake,

pardner," he said, and tucked the blanket around the wasted legs again. "I have to be careful. You've been sick. Who brought you down here? Who knew about this place?"

No words. No movement. The body was dead, but the eyes were vividly alive. They seemed trying to convey a message, but Bawn couldn't get it. He knew now that the man was some sort of a paralytic, helpless, unable to speak. As far as he was concerned the hidden vault under the patio might as well be untenanted. In time someone must come down to attend this cripple. Then, thought Bawn, he would learn the truth.

Bawn turned to a chimneyless fireplace equipped with a charcoal brazier. He touched the protruding horn of a graven bull's head, pulled. A panel swung out, leaving a dark opening. Bawn plunged in his hand and drew out a gunbelt and matched pair of inlaid Colt's pistols, pearl-gripped and in beautiful condition. These were the guns of Shamus Lafferty—guns that had roared their message against dictators in half a dozen countries. Bawn was smiling as he discarded the Mauser and the .45 Shelia had given him and wrapped the wide belt about his middle and tried the weapons. The sights were gone, for fast drawing, and they were hair-trigger jobs.

"Now," he said, more to himself than to the living dead man in the chair, "I'm fixed for them. Dad never fired them in half so good a cause."

Again his hand dipped into the black hole. The iron chest was there, and a tug at one of its handles told him it still held the savings of Shamus Lafferty's lifetime. "My nest egg for rainy days when my rheumatism works in old wounds," he used to say.

Bawn must have unconsciously murmured that phrase. He heard a choking sound and looked up at the cripple. As before, the face was a colorless mask, but the eyes were agitated. Piercing now, they

held a mixed look of fear, of joy, of triumph and of utter hopelessness. Those eyes shifted to the twin guns, and Bawn felt a twinge of poignant pity for the man. He moved to his side and put his hand on the skinny shoulder. And at that very instant an alien sound ran through the underground vault—the sound of the clicking latch at the bookcase.



BAWN darted to the doorway, flattening against the wall. He stuffed shells from the belt into the cylinder of one gun and waited, praying that the powder was still good. He heard someone descend the stairs, come scuffling along the corridor. A vagrant draft brought him the tantalizing aroma of coffee. He stiffened, leveling his gun, then lowered it as the man in night dress and slippers came in with the tray. It was old Chilito.

He gasped as he saw Bawn there, almost dropped the tray. Recovering, he grinned, looked at the open crypt at the fireplace and the guns at Bawn's thighs. "Little Bandy Legs," he breathed. "You got free, Dios be praised. And you will be safe here, with any kind of luck. Look at Patrick's eyes. He is so glad he can almost shout it, but not quite. He knew who you were the minute you tapped the hiding place and put on the guns. See him smile."

The eyes were smiling, it was true, but the face was as blank and nerveless as the countenance of a marble statue, and quite as bloodless. Bawn's face was the one torn with emotions, as he catfooted to the cripple and stared into those eyes.

"Patrick," he murmured. "Patrick. Not Patrick Lafferty, Chilito?"

"Patrick Lafferty, your older brother, Bawn."

"But they told me he was dead," protested Bawn, taking the cripple's hand. It was cold as ice, clammy. "They told me Celaya had killed him."

"And it is just as well they think so, master. Better. It is true Celaya tried to kill Patrick, the night Celaya married Sheila and announced he was taking over the rancho. Patrick stood up for his rights. Celaya seemed to back down—until Patrick turned away from him. Then the knife flashed. . . . *Dios*, I saw it happen. Patrick fell and Celaya strode from the room. When he came with his Yaquis to take the body out for burial, I had Patrick under ground. He did not die under my nursing, but there have been times, patron, when I believe he condemned me for bringing him back. His hair turned like this in a night. He has never moved a muscle. I have trouble getting enough food in him to keep him alive."

"Can he hear?" asked Bawn, and needed no affirmation from Chilito to know Patrick Lafferty could hear perfectly. Having satisfied himself on that score, he gripped that dead hand and in a low, fervent voice, said, "Pat, I can't believe that you are the big, strapping fellow I remembered after running away from Potrero Grande. But I can believe that Celaya, whom I knew as the Chihuahua Kid, did this to you. It's another debt, added to the killing of Cariguileno, the enslavement of Sheila, the rape of this rancho and his treatment of me. He'll pay for all of these, Pat, believe me. And when he has paid, we'll take what dad hid in the iron chest and send you to a medico. That's a promise."

The eyes grew soft with gratitude and comfort. And then Chilito was taking his leave so as to be at his post before the house was fully roused.

Chapter VIII

SURPRISE ALLY

WORN in body and in spirit, Bawn slept the sleep of exhaustion. Chilito woke him when he came with food. It was night again, the evening

before the Good Friday fiesta. A great quantity of liquor had been freighted in from Llanero and already drinking was general. The Yaquis had been furnished marihuana and were already crying for a prisoner to play with. There was fighting among themselves, and Roberto Celaya was worried.

"He is afraid, master," said the old mozo. "He says nothing about your escape, but he has had the house searched and is frightened because there is no trace of you. It reminds him of the disappearance of Don Patrick's body. He drinks too much and mumbles constantly of the black magic."

Bawn grunted, studying. "You say the Yaquis are calling for a prisoner, Chilito. Any chance he will turn Gualterios over to them?"

The servant shrugged. "*Quien sabe, patron?* Who knows? Anything they want in this house they can have. They are the key to Celaya's revolt. Without them he cannot win. If they demand a victim, Celaya will give them the only one he holds. Enrique Gualterios."

"Where is he?"

"In the storeroom, the one to the left, off the rear corridor. Adjoining the cell you dug out of."

"I'll go get him out," said Bawn, and settled the twin weapons against his hips.

"But master, you—"

"Is there any way to get horses, Chilito?"

"None, master. But there are several tied at the rack, beside the coach entrance to the patio. Celaya insists that they always be ready there."

"Good. Be sure the door from the main sala to the patio is unlocked, understand? Then get on one of those horses and ride like devils were after you. Ride to Ojos Azules and get the Rurales pointed in here to kill this revolution. And, Chilito! Gualterios spoke of Celaya having dynamite. Where is it?"

"The first four guest rooms adjoining

the office are being used as an armory, *patron*. There is a larger store in the Hunyadi house, I am told, and another in some secret place. Just what is in the rooms above, I do not—"

"The rooms are locked?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"You have the key?"

"No, *patron*. The guarding of arms was in the hands of Carlos Montana. He is dead and I do not know who guards it now, or who has a key."

"I'll get in," said Bawn. "You get started on that ride. And burn up the miles, Chilito. Burn them like you used to when you were young . . . and a brave *vaquero*. If you don't get back in time . . ."

He didn't finish. Chilito, strangely excited, grasped his hand, whirled and was already taking the stairs three at a time. Bawn looked at his brother, that terribly aged cadaver with the expressionless face and the seeing eyes. Those eyes showed excitement now, more than anything else. Fierce fires blazed there, and Bawn understood just what thoughts went on in that locked brain, just what hopes and fears.

"Pat," he said, as he attacked the food, "if Chilito don't make it through Celaya's lines, and something should happen to me tonight, it will be pretty tough on you, won't it?"

The cripple's lids dropped and lifted; the flash and flare of his pupils had given way to calm resignation. The answer was plain. "I know," said Bawn. "You'd rather die, knowing something was cooking, than to live and just go on with this damnable existence. Me too, Pat. Either we die together or we knock hell out of this revolution and get you into a surgeon's care."

The eyes thanked him, and presently Bawn finished eating. He gave one of Patrick's cold hands a reassuring pressure and left the secret vault. Alone in the blackness of the office, surrounded by relics of Shamus Lafferty's adventurous life, Bawn felt the impact of the forces swirling about

the *casa*. From beyond the coach entrance he caught the sudden rattle of swift hoof echoes, heard the "*alto!*" of the sentry, then a shot. There was no faltering in the pony's stride, despite the rattle of musketry in the night. Bawn prayed that old Chilito was not hit, that he could command the strength and the savvy to make it out of Valle Organo.



SHOTS were apparently a dime a dozen around here, for they never so much as caused a ripple in the bawdy clamor coming from the main *sala*. Raucous laughter. A bar of drunken song. Clink of glassware. And from out front the low muttering, as of many men conversing in sullen tones.

A few steps took Bawn to the door leading into the adjoining guest room. As he had supposed, it was stoutly locked, probably barred. Beyond it, if Chilito had been right, lay the needed wherewithal to put a crimp in Celaya's plans. A search along the walls turned up a whorl of South American broad-bladed spears. Bawn wrenched one loose from its bracket, stood it in the corner against his future needs. Then he took another down and carried it pressed against his left side as he let himself out into the patio.

The fountained court seemed peaceful and devoid of humans, but Bawn took a precious five minutes to verify that judgment. That caution was rewarded. A faint squeak of a rusty hinge struck from the rear of the patio. A ghost-like figure, bent low, moved silently, swiftly along the narrow walk in the deep shadow of the arcade.

Bawn stepped back into the office doorway, conscious of a gun glittering in the skulker's hand, wondering if this could be Chilito, unhorsed by that gunfire and sneaking back to announce his failure. Certainly it could be no friend of the revolu-

tion, by the very nature of his approach.

The skulker was passing him, his face turned toward the door into the main *sala*, when Bawn called a halt. One step he took, jamming his gun into the man's ribs.

"Put 'em up!" he rasped. "One peep out of you and I'll blow your guts out."

The gun dropped. The hands went up. A slow, disarmingly calm voice said, "I cave, pardner. I never auger with a gun."

Something about that drawl set the wires strumming in Bawn's mind. "Butch!" he gasped. "Butch Cassidy, or I'm crazy."

"Merino . . . cripes!" The hand of the longrider chieftain found Bawn's. "Whatever from hell you doin' here?"

"In here, Butch." Bawn pulled him into the office. "I live here, Butch. This was my father's house, mine now if I can broom the vermin out. You?"

"You know how I look at traitors, Merino. Hank Walters and the Chihuahua Kid damn near killed me at Temosachic. I escaped their trap, but a couple of better men than they are got killed and I was laid up for a couple of months. I've followed them here, and they pay or collect, one or the other. North America just ain't big enough for the three of us."

Bawn told him of his meeting with Hank Walters, of the revolution fostered by the man they knew as the Chihuahua Kid, of the man's ruthlessness, and of his own determination to avenge his crippled brother. "I reckon Hank told the truth," he finished.

"He was horned into the deal without knowledge of what was comin' off. Anyhow, I'm going to bring him here and he can tell his own story. Stay right here till I get back. If anybody comes he's no friend of mine. Let your conscience be your guide."

He left the man whose genius had set the law-enforcement agencies of three nations at naught, crossed the patio swiftly and tried the window of the room where he had buffaloed one of Celaya's officers, immediately after escaping from the cell. The window was open and he stepped through. The body had been removed, but nothing as yet had been done to the hole through the adobe partition. Once again Bawn crawled through. Luck was with him. The cell, having been rendered useless for Celaya's purposes, was not locked.

Now, only scant moments after leaving the office, Bawn stood before the door of the left hand storeroom. He had hoped to find the key in the lock. In that he was disappointed. He took a moment to consider. The corridor reeked with the smoke of *re-corte* cigarettes. That meant one guard around the angle, maybe two. Even three could be handled if need be, but not without rousing the house. But more likely there was only one guard, for there was no mutter of voices. Nor was there any light showing.

Bawn had to know. And he had to take the chance of doing this without alarm.

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He rapped slow and heavy on the panel. He heard Hank's muffled voice, cursing. Moreover he heard the thing he listened for—the guard's imprecation, the rasp of his soles against the flagstones and then his heavy tread.



SILENTLY, Bawn slid to the angle. The guard came swinging around the corner, brushing Bawn's arm. Bawn struck. The guard sighed, stumbled and fell. For an instant Bawn listened. He could hear nothing save the far murmur of those in the main *sala*, and Hank's high-pitched and irascible demand to learn the reason for the knock. Grasping the broad-bladed spear, Bawn drove it through the panel, pried, splintered, and struck again. Five times he drove the sharp blade through before the door split, falling away from the lock.

"Hank!"

"Merino! You tarnation danged fool, I'd a shot yuh dead if I'd had anything to shoot with. What's up?"

"This way," said Bawn. "Unless you want to do a little roastin' over a Yaqui fire. Come on."

"Comin'," rapped Hank. "Soon as I get my boots on. Yaquis, eh? Gettin' impatient. They told me I was due to fry tomorrow. Praise be you come. . . . Listen! Somebody comin'!"

Somebody *was* coming. Two or three people, at a hard run, warning one another in Spanish that the prisoner was breaking down the door. Light was growing in the corridor.

"Quick!" Bawn grabbed Hank as he came surging out, whirled him into the cell. He followed and was swinging the barred door shut when the first of the house guards, the one carrying a pistol and a lantern, came skidding around the angle.

It was the swinging door which caught the lantern beams and betrayed the fugi-

tives. The guard bawled, "There they go! Stop!"

He fired, the bullet clanging against a bar. Hank cursed and Bawn fired, just as the man leveled his gun for the second shot. He fell on his face, screaming, and the two behind him flashed into view, halted, and ducked back. The lamp, smashed against the flags, guttered and went out. The house was fully aroused now and it seemed that the corridor thundered with footsteps.

"Follow right at my heels," said Bawn, and went through the escape hole. Hank scuttled after him and together they went out the window and across the starlit patio. As they ran, Bawn prepared the little outlaw for the worst. "Butch is here," he muttered. "And he wants to see you."

Hank skidded to a halt. "Cripes. . . . Butch? Hell, lemme go back to that cell. I'll take my chances on the Yaquis."

"Get on with you." Bawn whirled the smaller man ahead, shoved him through the office door, which he locked after him. "No talk, boys!" he ordered. "This place will get too hot for us directly. Stay close to me." He sprang the secret panel, waved the two longriders ahead of him and closed up again. At the foot of the stairs, looking grim and gray in the faint glow of the lamp where Patrick sat, Butch Cassidy turned to face Bawn.

"Merino," he said, "did you know there was somebody hid in that room up there?"

"Surely not." Fear tugged at Bawn's heart. "What do you mean?"

"Somebody breathin' up there in the dark. I didn't know how the room was laid out, so I just allowed I'd hang an' rattle. Whoever it was figgered likewise an' there we stood, listenin' to each other breathe an' able to do nothin' about it."

"Stay here," gasped Bawn. "I've got to stop whoever that is or we'll have the Chihuahua Kid's Yaquis here."

He sped back to the office, scorning other hidden foes as he darted toward the door into the great *sala*. It opened before him,

emitting light and voices. For just a minute Sheila was silhouetted there, then the door closed behind her and Celaya's abuse struck through.

"Listen, you damned hussy, I've warned you to keep out of here when I'm busy. You've disobeyed me for the last time. You want prisoners, you head men of the Yaqui Legion, of the Army of Liberty. The men we save for tomorrow's festivities. Take this woman and get out."

Bawn entered silently, bleak and deadly, his guns palmed. "Wait, Celaya! Be the caballero you boast about—spare her and offer yourself. How about it, Yaquis? Like to play with him, eh?"

That slight shifting of interest was all Celaya awaited. He came up, drawing. Sheila was screaming, "Kill him, Bawn!"

Celaya jerked her to him, firing at Bawn. Her struggles made him miss. The Yaquis were unholstering. And Bawn was leveling the guns of his father.

Chapter IX

VIVA LA REVOLUCION!

KILL or be killed. Bawn had no chance against Celaya, and the Yaquis were drawing. They had come for a prisoner. If they died, Yaqui resentment might wash right over Celaya. Bawn shot with damningly spaced deliberation. His first shot caught a Yaqui in the chest. He carried a companion down with him. Bawn's second bullet blasted the gun arm of one and pierced the belly of the fellow at his elbow. All were down, and Celaya's bullets were singing close and thudding into the wall. The uninjured Yaqui came up, shooting. Bawn killed him.

Gunfire silenced. Yells broke from outside. Bawn darted to the door, dropped the bar. The Yaqui with the broken arm leaped at him with a knife. Bawn almost tore his head off with a swinging barrel. Bawn weighed his next move. Celaya, hid-

den in the main corridor, was inciting his uniformed dandies to attack, without much effect.

Bawn rubbed his side and grinned. He'd been lucky. Maybe his luck would last if he kept them jumping. He couldn't be of much help to Sheila, so. . .

Running, he quit the room, locked the doors leading into the small corridor, and entered the office. Swinging the secret panel, he called Hank and Butch. Without waiting, he caught up the cached spear, attacked the door to the guest room and had it open when the longriders joined him. He thumbed a match.

"How's your nerve, boys? Nothing so scary as fire in a powder room."

"Don't see you tremblin' none," growled Hank. "So I won't."

Butch said grimly, "What's on your mind, Kid? What am I into here?"

"Just what you walked into, with eyes open," said Bawn. "Our chances ain't so rosy. Be a thousand blood-hungry devils around us in a jiffy. Here's our only chance. Dynamite in them boxes there. Rolls of fuse yonder. Caps in these boxes in the corner. Down on your hunkers and make one-stick bombs with six-inch fuses. Work fast."

Fighting men roaring about the *casa* proved a sharper spur than argument. Powder boxes were pried open with the spear blade. Butch cut fuse lengths. Hank crimped on the deadly caps with disdain for their lethal potency. Bawn set the fuses and boxed the bombs.

As they worked, a door went down with a crash. High, fierce yells tore through the house and the enraged tribesmen began to scatter. One tried the door to the corridor and the three men rose, drawing guns. The attempt was given up, and Bawn sighed.

"Let's get these on the roof as sort of a discouragement," he said.

"Waste of time," grumbled Hank, "with a Gatling gun here, an' ca'tridges."

"Don't savvy a thing about a Gatling."

"Nor me," said Cassidy. "But one is worth a company of riflemen."

"That's what I've been learnin'," gloated Hank. "Let's clean 'em out, boys."

"Good." Hope ran strongly in Bawn. "Help him lift the thing, Butch, while I get the trap off the roof." He swung the secret panel again, threw out books and used the shelves as a ladder. From above, he gave them a hand. Pulling and boosting, they got the heavy piece on the flat roof, together with what ammunition there was.

"Boy, oh boy!" Hank chuckled as he set the rapid firer up. "Flowers for Chihuahua—skunk weed, snake grass an' nettles. Look nice on his grave, no?" He was laughing now.

"Listen," warned Butch. "I've heard that sound before. Like the Utes."

Drums were beating out there, and voices were lifting in the rhythm. "Yaqui drums," Bawn murmured. "Gourds, with human skin stretched over 'em. Got to have that kind to scare away spirits, or they won't fight at night. Nice playmates, Yaquis."

Somewhere another door went down and shooting started in the house. "After Chihuahua now," grunted Hank. "When a Yaqui's full of marihuana, all whites look alike."

Bawn thought so too, and paced restlessly behind the parapets. He had no sympathy for Celaya, but Sheila was kin to him. "Clean out that mob around the door," he ordered. "I've got something to do. Be back directly."



IGNORING Hank's protest, he dropped down, found cigars in a can in his father's desk, lit one. With bombs in his pockets, he stepped into the corridor just as Yaquis broke the door down. Bawn lit and let fly, hurling himself back into the office.

The explosion shook him up, blew out the lights in the *sala* and cleared the cor-

ridor. Breathing a prayer of thanks that the jolt hadn't set off his other bombs, Bawn tumbled over the debris and through the wrecked door. Again a fuse sputtered. The explosion wreaked havoc in the big room, starting a rush for the exits by those still able to move. They jammed the doorway and Bawn blew more to pieces with a third bomb. Save for a few groaning, weakly threshing victims, the great room was silent now.

Up above, the Gatling gun was chattering its siren song of death. And the effect of the rain of bullets upon the clustered throng outside was incalculable. It added to the panic of those debauching from the room of horror. In the uproar, Bawn became aware that pistol shots were ripping from the main corridor. Not at him, but at the open doorway. So Bawn ducked into the patio, repeating his earlier maneuver when he rescued Hank. This time he found the cell door locked, but one stick of powder, properly placed, blew it off its hinges. Bawn, having crawled through the hole into the bedroom, hardly felt the blast.

Moving swiftly, Bawn darted into the main corridor, sent a bomb crashing ahead of him and ducked into a room from which a thin sliver of light struck into the hallway. The four people in that room cowered down as the explosion sent whitewash down upon them. Celaya, his torso bare and red from a superficial wound, swore. "*Dios* plague the fools. They are shelling me. Me, in whom their whole future rests."

Sheila, at his side with a shirt ready to be donned, said, "Hurry, before one hits this room. We must leave the *casa* before morning, or else. . . ." She halted, and the word caught in her throat as she saw Bawn. "Oh!" she gasped, and turned white as death. "Don't, Bawn, don't! Not now. We are too few now to hope. . . ."

The two guards, who stood watching Celaya, whirled and stabbed for their guns. The erstwhile Chihuahua Kid cast one fleeting glance at the man he had now

branded his first enemy and dived for the gun on the table. Bawn, with no lost motion, killed one of the guards. His second shot went wild as the target fell to the floor, and then Bawn was down with a searing, tearing pain in his chest that seemed to rip out his lungs. His was the next shot, and the man who had wounded him cried weakly and fell dead. But the split second timing of shots, so essential in battle against high odds, had been spoiled and Bawn found Celaya on his feet, his face a mask of hatred as he brought his gun down.

Bawn was facing wrong and he could never get his weapon around in time. He swerved, braced himself for bullet shock. With a scream, Sheila hurled herself upon Celaya, shrilling, "No, Roberto! NO!"

The gun thundered. Shot through the middle, Sheila hung to the man she had wedded, a soft prayer sighing through her lips. Then her knees sagged and she slipped down, slowly. Only once she looked around. She was smiling. In this last act she had justified a life of selfishness, dying for her blood.

It had given Celaya pause—and Bawn time to surge erect. His gun dangled in his fingers. On his lips was a twisted, tired expression, an icy, patient smile. In a rasping whisper, for his chest was a welter of agony, he said, "Maybe she had that

coming, Chihuahua, maybe not. But not from you. Get your gun smoking or I'll kill you like a dog for the way you fixed that brother of mine. Paralyzed, Chihuahua, his spine cut in two. A living dead man. And here's to the bushwhacker that got Old Hook Nose. Shoot."

Celaya didn't demur. In Bawn's eyes he saw no mercy, no stomach for further talk. A brave man, he did what brave men do when their number is up—made the best fight in him. It was over quickly. Celaya was fast as he tilted his gun. Bawn was even faster. Two shots blended. Bawn's bullet took the Chihuahua Kid center. Celaya's came within an inch of breaking Bawn's hip, cutting a nasty wound in the upper thigh.

A wild, half mad grin twisted Celaya's face as he caught at the table edge with one hand, strove to stem his escaping life force by placing his palm over the hole in his belly. "That," he whispered, "wasn't the slowest you ever moved, Merino. *Viva la revolution!*" And so he died.



BAWN knelt to verify that Sheila was dead, then darted out into the black hall filled with acrid powder fumes. Somewhere down the line a wounded native



groaned. About the *casa* men milled like ravening beasts. A cannon thundered, down at the camp, and Bawn felt the impact of the shell against the earth. Above it all sounded the monotonous *rat-tat-tat* of the Gatling. It was war to the teeth now, three against the horde.

Suddenly lonely, Bawn went back through the hole and, moments later, climbed to the roof. Hank knelt, toiling at the Gatling crank, and Butch Cassidy stood with legs wide-spread, blasting away with two six-shooters. Nobody spoke when Bawn joined them. They were too busy for that. Warned by the costly lesson, the Yaquis were avoiding the inside of the house where the big blasts had blown many of them apart. They were mad with marihuana and mescal, intent only upon blasting aside the resistance on the roof.

They came in waves, screeching like demons, delighting in the fight. Far back their drummers beat the rhythm. The starlit yard writhed with hurtling shapes, charging the house, some firing as they came, some carrying ladders. Hank laughed aloud as he mowed them down. Fast as a ladder was dropped, another man was there to lift it and carry it nearer. From four sides they came, achieving success where the Gatling gun couldn't reach.

With eyes like a cat, Butch let fly a shot whenever a head showed. With his cigar glowing between his lips, Bawn hurled his bombs, shattering any concentration of enemies on the roof. From behind the charging tribesmen, the regulars of the revolt kept up a futile long range fire. Only their cannon was to be feared, and their wild marksmanship with that hinted at what the fate of the revolution would have been if it had ever locked with Federal troops.

The three on the roof had taken a terrible toll, but it was not given to flesh and blood to hold against such odds, such a fearful, unending attack. Men were suddenly in the office, trying to climb up. Butch called

Bawn's attention to it and Bawn lighted and dropped a bomb. The explosion seemed to lift the roof with its giant *vigas*.

Very calmly, Bawn said, "That's the last of the dynamite, boys," and drew his guns.

Hank said, "Gun's jammed, gents," without a quiver, and lifted his rifle.

Butch said, "How many .45 shells you got on you, Merino? I'm fresh out."

There were more cartridges below, but no time to get them. So they tried to fight off the attack. In three places the Yaquis had obtained a foothold on the roof and were throwing lead. More were coming up, swarming from all sides. Suddenly the roof thronged with them.

"Time to get downstairs," said Bawn. "You first, Hank." Their only chance now was in the secret basement.

Almost as if in answer to his order, all firing ceased. The yells tailed out into awed squawks. A vast silence enfolded a scene so recently a bedlam of battle. A very shrill and very fearful voice yelled, "Cariaguileno! *Se murio, pero espectro ahora*. Hook Nose is dead but now he haunts us!"

Another took it up, quaveringly. "*Madre de Dios, es Viernes Santo*. It is Good Friday! We should be dancing and singing away devils, praying instead of killing."

With a howl they broke, chattering, trampling, crushing one another in their desire to escape. They leaped from the roof, many breaking their legs. Bawn first thought of the waning of the marihuana kick. Then he saw Cariaguileno standing at the far corner of the *casa* roof, his long beard tossing in the sharp dawn wind, his tattered clothes whipping. He stood looking out over the yard, with its littered bodies, his hands upraised as if in benediction. A strange sort of phosphorescence surrounded him, making him easily visible, even as far off as the hill house of the ill-fated Hunyadi.

Then the dawn light had rent the mists, and the vision was gone. But Bawn had seen it and Hank and Butch too. And the

Yaquis were fleeing to their horses, to take their departure for their beloved hill forts. And streaming across the plain, with Chilito like a gray ghost at their head, came the Federal cavalry, their bugler piping the charge. And the three on the roof cheered the riders until they were hoarse.

◇ ◇ ◇

THERE were grim happenings in Organ Valley, that memorable Good Friday when the prediction of Cariaguileño came to pass and the leaderless revolt was crushed. But the three long-riders took no part in it. They sat in the office of Shamus Lafferty, licking their wounds, drinking whiskey and soda and discussing Old Hook Nose.

On one thing they were agreed. All had seen him standing there. And later the hermit's cave was found open, his body gone. Old Hook Nose was never seen again in Organ Valley, where to this day his life and death have been woven into a legend to be told and retold on Good Friday. Some talk of making him a saint.

Along about night, Butch rose and gripped Bawn's hand. All three were a little drunk. "Thanks for a good scrap to get my blood runnin', Merino," he said.

"How about ridin' to Montana with me?"

Bawn shook his head. "Couldn't ask for better company, Butch, but . . . no."

"I could hand-pick the United States an' not find a better man, Merino. What's on your mind?"

"I belong here, Butch. Got chores cut out for me. First I gotta get that brother of mine to a good surgeon. After that I ride for Santa Fe, to spruce up a bit, and then to a little town on the Rio for a gal who's waitin' for me."

"Lucky devil." Cassidy looked old. "How about you, Hank?"

"Thanks just the same, Butch, but somebody's gotta look after Merino. Once he gets that gal down here he won't even have sense enough to keep his powder dry."

They shook hands all around and Butch was gone into the darkness. "There goes a man to ride the river with," said Bawn.

"In one way of speakin', yes," said Hank, shuddering. "But don't never get crossed up with him, son. You didn't see his eyes when you left me alone with him down below. Blood on the moon . . . whee-ew!"

But Bawn was listening to hoofbeats, heading north. They grew dim to the ears and presently they were silenced . . . forever.

THE END

BURR!

PURR!

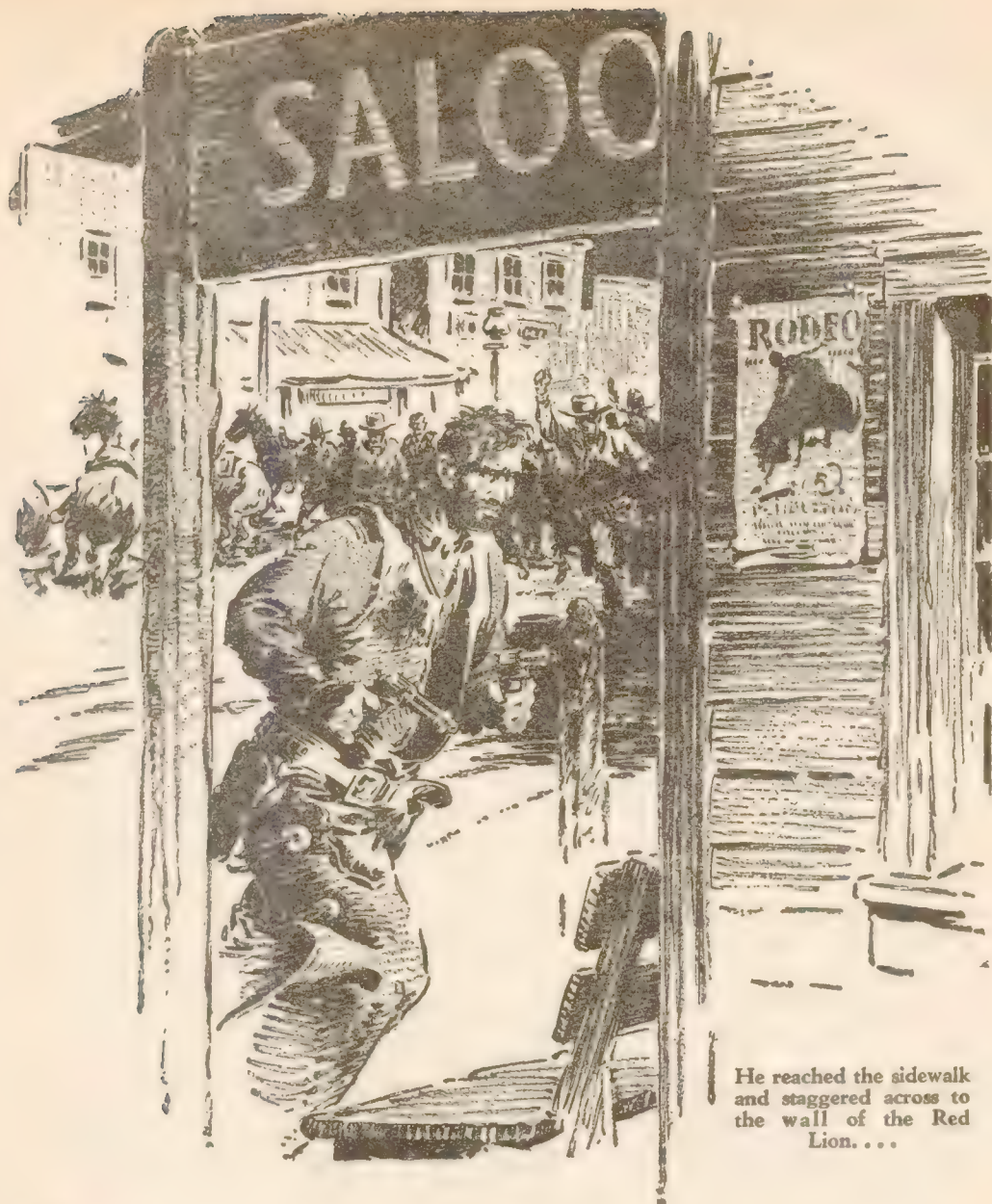
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He reached the sidewalk
and staggered across to
the wall of the Red
Lion...

Coward's Coffin Come-Back

By
ELI
COLTER

Only God knew how afraid Todd Larkin was that day he rode to Doghouse Bend for a bullet payoff with the killer-bully who had made his life a yellow-belly's hell—for Larkin knew he was doomed to end up in a box!

TODD LARKIN paused with a hand on the door latch. He did not lift the latch; didn't make any move toward entering the old slab line cabin. He merely stood there on the step, listening intently for any sound that might come from within.

None came. The cabin was still—as though it housed only the dead.

Larkin thought, a little sickly, that perhaps that was true. Maybe Hart was already dead. Maybe he, Todd, hadn't got there in time.

Happy hadn't wasted any time trying to work on Hart himself, he'd said. Happy had only gotten him to the first place where he could leave him comfortable, and ridden for help.

Todd hesitated, staring at the plank door. No use trying to peer through the window. The flour-sack curtains were too thick. He couldn't bear the thought of walking in there and finding Hart dead, but he had to know.

He set his teeth, and lifted the latch. He flung the door wide. The interior of the one room cabin was instantly revealed to his searching gaze.

Hart Anderson lay on the old pole bunk, motionless, eyes closed. His face was drawn and colorless. He looked dead.

Larkin felt his throat pinch. He advanced swiftly into the cabin. He reached the bunkside before he saw that Hart was alive.

Hart was breathing lightly, from the tops of his lungs, but he was definitely breathing. The horse blanket thrown over him rose and fell almost imperceptibly with each intake and exhalation of air.

Larkin leaned over and placed a hand on Anderson's shoulder. To Larkin's surprise, Anderson instantly opened his eyes. A thin smile lighted the drained, pale face on the bunk.

"Todd!" Anderson's voice was shaky, but it was clear. "You shore got here quick."

Larkin reached for the homemade limb-and-rawhide chair a few feet away; he sat down close to the head of the bunk.

"I come as fast as horseflesh could bring me, Hart."

"You must of. Happy ain't been gone a hour yit."

"Who done it?" Larkin demanded harshly. "And why? How bad you hit? Happy jest said you was shot, and wanted me. Chest wound, he said. Didn't seem to know no more."

"He didn't." Hart Anderson blinked, as if to clear his sight. "I wouldn't tell him. I sort of figured I'd better keep it between me'n you. And leave it up to you to tell what you wanted to."

Larkin frowned. "You ain't sort of outa yore haid, are you, Hart?"

"I ain't. There's reason to what I'm sayin'. You'll git it in a minute. I can't tell you who shot me. I don't know. I never seen him afore."

"You never seen him!" Larkin echoed. "Ain't been no strangers around Paradise Range for a dog's age, Hart."

The fear had not come yet. The awful devastating fear Todd believed he had left so far behind.

Why should it? Why should he think now, even fleetingly, of the town of Weir Bluff, or of Moe Dorgan? Both Dorgan and Weir Bluff were so many years and miles back in the past that, at last, he had very nearly succeeded in shutting them out of memory, once and for all.

Why should Todd Larkin suddenly think of either, simply because somebody had taken a shot at Hart Anderson out on the range? Though, for that matter, why should anyone take a shot at Hart? Paradise Range was a peaceful land. Peaceful. Quiet. Remote. A long way from Weir Bluff, too.

That was why Todd Larkin had come to Paradise Range and settled. Though nobody around here knew that. Nobody on

Paradise Range knew anything about what had happened back there in Weir Bluff. Larkin didn't intend that they ever should know.

Suddenly he became conscious of Hart Anderson's voice going on.

"Nope, I never seen him afore," Hart said. "He jest come ridin' along when me'n Happy was over there to the south water hole. That hole ain't been so good of late, Todd."

"I know. What was you doin'?"

"I was cleanin' the mud from the bottom of the hole, so the critters could git a drink and not have to eat so much dirt."

"Where was Happy?"

"He'd gone on over the hill to ketch that little bay gelding you was wantin', as long as we was in the neighborhood."

"So you was there at the waterhole alone when this fella come ridin' along? But what the hell did he shoot you for?" Larkin demanded, frank bewilderment in his eyes. "So far it sounds crazy."

"It *is* crazy," Anderson agreed quietly. "And it gits crazier. He thought I was you. Big man he was. Twicet as big as you'n me put together. Awful dark. Stubbed. Hadn't been shavin'."

All Todd heard clearly of that speech was the sharp significance in those words, "he thought I was you." The first brush of the fear came then. But he shoved it from him. It was too fantastic, after all these years. He'd left too cold a trail behind him. It couldn't be.

"He thought you was *me*!" he echoed thickly. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Well, I spoke to him," Hart answered. "Only bein' civil. I says, 'Howdy, stranger.' He took one good look at me, then drags out his gun. He says, 'So I run you down at last, have I?' Then he lets fly."

"You mean he—shot you? Givin' you no chance to draw?"

Hart snorted his indignation. "I didn't even have my gun on. Me havin' to lie on my belly like that in the mud. I'd took

it off and slung it over my saddlehorn. And he had to know it. He couldn't help seein' my horse there on the edge of the hole. Neither could he help seein' that belt and gun hangin' onto the saddlehorn."

"Not unless he was blind," Larkin said thickly. His throat felt stiff. "But you couldn't of been layin' on yore belly when he shot?"

"Nope. I'd kinda slewed round and half sat up, jest to take a look. I thought it was Happy comin' back. Bullet knocked me flat. But that jasper knowed I wasn't done for. He didn't intend me to be. He says: 'The old score's goin' to be evened up this time, Larkin. I'll be waitin' for you in Doghouse Bend tomorrow afternoon. You meet me man to man, or—you know what happened last time.' Then he rid off. What the hell's he mean, Todd? Who is he?"

Larkin didn't answer. The fear came then, stark and demoralizing, rolling over him in an icy, engulfing wave.

His mind went back to Moe Dorgan and Weir Bluff fast enough now. It fairly leaped over the years and the space between. The old crawling, paralyzing fear. It struck to the heart and the spine. He felt himself grow sick and cold with it.

"Todd!" Hart said. "What's he mean? What was it happened last time? Where?"

Larkin licked dry lips. "I—I had him run outa the country for horse stealin'. Back in Weir Bluff, Wyomin'."

"When?"

"Ten year ago. I should of filled him full of lead. He killed little Bill. I knowed it. But I couldn't prove it. But I *could* prove the horse stealin'. So I—I jest had him run outa the country. I helped run him out."

"And you ain't seen him since?"

"No. I ain't." Larkin tried desperately to change the subject "Happy said that he stopped on the way home to send the doc out here to the line cabin. The doc been here yit?"

"Oh, yeah. Been gone twenty minutes or more when you come. Said I wasn't hurt bad. Said I better stay here a day or two, though, afore you took me home."

"He say you was goin' to be all right?" Larkin asked anxiously.

"Oh, shore," Hart said quickly. "All I got to do is take it a mite easy. But, Todd. This here black-haired jigger that shot me . . ."

Todd Larkin rose abruptly to his feet. "I'm gittin' him, fella. Doghouse Bend, tomorrow afternoon, he said? I'll send Happy over to stay with you till I git back. You'll be enough better so we kin cart you home, by then."

"I guess I cain't argue with you, Todd. Not as I'd want to. I'd never have had a bed to lie in if it wasn't for you. Me, hungry, broke, no place to light—"

"Forget it," Larkin cut in. "We made a bargain, didn't we? Yore brains and my land. Yore partnership and my cattle. But I didn't figure on yore sharin' my troubles, too. You remember how, when I took you on, I done told you that you looked like little Bill?"

"I ain't never forgot it. I been tryin' like hell to fill up some the empty spot Bill must of left."

"You done it," Larkin said crisply. "Seemed sometimes like you was jest Bill growed up. But the last few years, you been lookin' more like me. Like I looked ten year ago. Anybody that hadn't seen me

for ten year could of been excused for thinkin' you was me."

"You ain't got no call to go feelin' upset like this, though, Todd. And to go gunnin' for—"

"I got proof now, ain't I?" Todd interrupted savagely. "You leave this to me. I'm goin' straight home and round Happy up. You mind Happy and take it easy whilst I'm gone."

He went out swiftly and closed the door behind him.



HE COULDN'T know that Hart thought his face looked terrible. That it was a face to shrink from in dismay. The kind of face a man wouldn't want to meet behind a pair of guns. He couldn't know that his fear, and his frantic effort to hide that fear, had combined to form on his visage an expression no man could read.

He knew only the awful fear had him by the throat again, as it had held him once long ago in Weir Bluff. And it held him now. He was shaking with it as he swung onto his horse and headed for home.

He did everything he could think of to rid himself of it. He tried to reason, but reason was vanquished. He tried to curse himself out of it, but the curses died on his stumbling tongue. Maybe if he shoved



his mount hard enough, he could outride the fear.

He hit a terrific pace going home. But he couldn't outride his terror. It had frozen in the pit of his stomach, like a ton of rock, by the time he rode up the lane into the ranchyard.

And even if he had been able to shed it, there was something in the yard that would have revived the crawling fear all over again.

He dragged his horse to a sliding stop, his eyes staring and dilated, at sight of Happy lying in the barnyard, dead as a nail, with three bullets through his head.

Neither of the other two ranch hands was in sight.

Larkin leaned on the saddlehorn for an instant, staring in sick incredulity. Happy! The best cowhand any man had ever hired. The best damn friend any man could hope to find. Happy, slaughtered like a locoed dogie. Larkin tried to swallow the lump that choked his throat. This would be some more of Moe's work.

Larkin got off his horse and staggered dazedly over to Happy's body. He drew a difficult breath, bent down and lifted Happy's skinny little carcass into his arms, and started with it toward the bunkhouse, still staring, unseeing, still staggering drunkenly.

Then Moe Dorgan appeared abruptly in the open bunkhouse doorway, a gun in his hand, a leer on his dark face.

Larkin stopped short, hugging Happy's dusty, bloody body against his chest, barely able to keep his feet, aware of Moe's brutal face through a distorting haze.

"Well, well, well!" Moe drawled. "So the boys was tellin' me the truth, and it wasn't you I seen up there at the water-hole. You lily-livered, yellow-bellied skunk!"

Todd didn't answer. He couldn't. His throat was too thick. He couldn't even think very well.

Running around crazily in his head was

the realization that Moe had beat Happy to the draw. There wasn't a scratch on Dorgan. Dorgan was fast enough to beat Happy. And Happy had been one of the fastest gunslicks on the hoof.

"Easy to make the mistake, though," Dorgan drawled. "That other hombre *did* look a lot like you, Larkin. Your boys told me as how he was really only your partner. Or is, I should say. I didn't kill him. I don't have to be told that. I didn't shoot to kill. But I will, next time, Larkin. I'll shoot to kill when you meet me in Doghouse Bend tomorrow afternoon."

Todd licked dry lips with a dryer tongue. But still he didn't answer. Still he couldn't speak. The awful fear had frozen him to the spot. Held him stuck to the earth on which he stood, as damp flesh sticks to ice-cold iron.

"And if you don't meet me in Doghouse Bend tomorrow afternoon," Dorgan sneered, "they'll run you out of Paradise Range, just as they run you out of Weir Bluff—because you was afraid of me. Run you out for the measly low-down son of a coward you are. Tomorrow afternoon, Larkin. I'll be waitin'."

He stepped down from the bunkhouse porch. His hulking body moved lightly, for all its size. He went striding across the yard toward the barn, where he had left his horse, not even deigning to glance Larkin's way again.

Larkin never moved, until he heard the sound of the horse's hoofs departing up the lane.

Then he swallowed hard and forced his leaden feet to carry him on. On into the bunkhouse. Where he could lay Happy down.

Where he could lay Happy down, and hide himself for a time with his bitter shame. And have a chance to straighten out his face, before Sam Patchard and Shorty came riding in from the range. But he again stopped short in dismay, as he stepped into the bunkhouse doorway.

Sam Patchard and Shorty were lying, bound and gagged, on the floor between him and the bunks at the other end of the room.

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LARKIN cursed and staggered past them, laid Happy down on his own bed, and wheeled back to free the two bound men.

His haggard eyes searched them swiftly as he cut the ropes that tied them together. They had been battered pretty badly by Moe Dorgan's huge fists, but neither of them was wounded.

Patchard, the taller and leaner of the two, swallowed and spat, then stretched his cramped muscles. "Phewee! That jigger's the damn fastest thing from hell to breakfast, guns or fists. And the biggest hombre I ever seen, man and boy, wrapped up in one hide."

"Yaay man!" Shorty agreed fervently. "And, boys, howdy! If he don't pack a wallop like a bay mule, you can sew me up in a sack and call me custard."

"Don't like his chin music none, neither." Patchard's lean face set in ugly lines under its livid bruises. "Callin' the boss a coward. Whyn't you mow him down, boss?"

"I—I had Happy in my arms," Todd answered hoarsely.

"Sort of likes to take people inconvenient, don't he?" Shorty sneered. "We was eatin'. Guns hangin' in the bunkhouse."

"And him sayin' the boss ever got run outa anywhere on account he was skeered of him!" Patchard was white with indignation and outrage. "Damn him, boss, you got to let me'n Shorty go with you tomorrow when you fog it to clean up on that jasper. After what he done to Happy, we ain't goin' to leave one square inch of him stickin' to the other."

"No." Todd's face was bleached. "I'm goin' alone."

"Hell, you cain't do that to us!" Patchard protested. "I don't blame you none, for wantin' to do the job all by yore lonesome. After him sayin' that about yore bein' run outa Weir Bluff, wherever the hell that is, but—"

"It's true." Todd's voice thickened again, so hoarse it rasped. But he stood straight, and looked his two men in the face with bleak and and terrible eyes. "It's—*true*."

Patchard stared. "That you was run out for bein' *afraid*?"

"Yeah. I had him run out first. For horse stealin'. I got a big posse together. To run him out. He'd killed my brother—shot little Bill down in cold blood. I couldn't prove it."

"But you *knowed* it?"

"I knowed it shore certain." Todd swallowed, and tried in vain to clear his throat. "Everybody knowed it. I should of filled Dorgan full of lead. Everybody knowed that, too. Jest as they knowed afterward that all my talk about not havin' proof was a excuse, that I was afraid."

"You, boss?" Shorty said wonderingly. "Are you stringin' us?"

"I ain't. I ain't even stringin' myself no more. I was feared as death of him."

"But why, boss? Why? One man's as big as another when he's got a gun."

"He—he's too fast." Todd licked his lips again with a dry tongue. "Nobody kin beat him to the draw. It jest cain't be done. I knowed that. Nobody kin lick him in a fist fight. He hits too hard. And he's too big. Twicet as big as me. And when folks in Weir Bluff found out I was scared stiff of him, they—they run me out. Jest like I'd had him run out."

"And you come here and settled because it was quiet," Patchard said, an odd look growing on his thin face. "I remember yo're tellin' us that. Quiet and peaceful, you said. A long way from this here Weir Bluff and from people that remembered, too, eh?"

"Yeah." Todd drew a long hard breath. "And now he'll have me run outa Paradise Range, for the same reason."

"Unless you go to meet him in Doghouse Bend tomorrow," Shorty said softly.

"Yeah." Todd's eyes went unseeingly from one man's face to the other. "Unless I meet him in Doghouse Bend. He made shore I'd have to meet him, or else never show my face around here again."

"By shootin' Hart, you mean?"

Todd nodded. "And killin' Happy. Like a—like a dare. Like he's sayin', 'See, this is what I kin do to yore partner or yore cow hands, any time I wanta—come and git me if you got the guts'. And he knows I ain't got the guts."

Patchard and Shorty both looked at him, then looked away. They avoided each other's gaze.

"We'll stop his clock for him, boss," Shorty said. "You kin depend on us." His voice was slightly cold.

"We'll make hash outen him," Patchard said politely.

"No." Todd's hoarse voice rose in savage vehemence. "No! I'm yore boss. You got to mind my orders. I say no! You keep away from Doghouse Bend. You ain't goin'."

"No?" Patchard said curiously. His voice had icicles in it. "I reckon you wouldn't have nothin' to say about it, if we wasn't workin' for you no more, Todd."

"Ain't no law to stop us from quittin' our jobs right now," Shorty said. His voice had icicles in it, too.

"I don't care if you're workin' for Jesus Johnson!" Todd's haggard eyes glared at them. "Or if you ain't got no more job than a jackrabbit. You stay away from Doghouse Bend and keep yore noses outa this."

"Hmmm." Patchard's gaze bored into Todd's forehead. "Why?"

"Because I'm goin'. That's why. *I'm* goin'. And I'm goin' alone."

"To fight Dorgan?" Shorty said.

"To kill him!" Somehow the hoarseness had faded from his tones. They had taken on a hard, tight ring. "I'm goin' to kill him."

"You mean you ain't afraid no more?"

"I'm so damned scared I'm sick. And I know he'll git me. But I'm goin' to kill him. He ain't goin' to run me outa Paradise Range. He murdered little Bill. He plugged Hart. He blasted Happy down. And he'll kill me. And you kin bury me on Paradise Range. But nobody kin ever run me outa anywhere ag'in because I'm afraid!"

Shorty stared out the window and blinked.

The queer look faded slowly from Patchard's face. He rubbed the soil from his palm, on the side of his pants, then held out his hand.

"I'd like to shake hands with you, boss. Kin me'n Shorty oil yore guns for you?"



TODD LARKIN didn't sleep much that night. Each time he closed his eyes he kept seeing Dorgan's grin. Then he would shiver with fear, and lie wide awake again.

Along toward midnight he began seeing other faces in the dark. Little Bill's face, white and upturned in the starlight. Hart's still countenance there on the bunk, with the horse blanket drawn up to his chin. Happy's bloody, dead head in the dust.

And Shorty's face, too, the way it had looked when he blinked and gazed out the bunkhouse window. And Patchard's lean visage, when he had said, "Kin me'n Shorty oil yore guns for you?"

By the time daylight came seeping in through the panes, the other faces had crowded Dorgan out. And he was only there in the background, a smudged shadow. A foul smudge that had to be wiped out, so that the page of memory might be kept clean—if a man carried memory on

with him into that other country beyond the Big Divide, Todd told himself, as he rolled out of bed and dressed, to go eat breakfast with Shorty and Patchard.

He wasn't fooling himself. He wasn't going to come back from that encounter with Moe Dorgan. And he hadn't got rid of the fear. It was still there, doing hand-springs up and down his spine.

Only he was bigger than it was now. It couldn't stop him. It could take him down into the grave, but it couldn't stop him from evening up the score that had been fouled so long ago.

He walked just a little straighter than usual, and his head was a trifle higher than ordinary, as he let himself out of the kitchen and headed for the chuck house.

After breakfast he went into the bunkhouse to get the two guns Shorty and Patchard had oiled for him. He strapped the two laden belts about his waist, and walked out to saddle his horse.

Patchard came ambling casually from the barn, leading the horse all ready to ride.

Patchard said with a half yawn, "I jest thought if you was goin' to make Doghouse Bend by afternoon, you better git a early start and not have to hurry none."

Todd nodded, and swung up into the saddle. He didn't look back, and neither of them spoke again, as he nudged the animal into motion and went riding up the lane.

Consequently he didn't see Shorty come out of the barn to join Patchard, and the two of them standing there watching him out of sight.

He couldn't hear Shorty say, "I reckon that hombre was right, Sam. Sew me in a sack, if he wasn't."

"What hombre, dumb wit?" Patchard said.

"That jasper what said that a hero wasn't a hombre that didn't have no fear: but was a fella that was scared to death but went and doné it all the same. Well,

you got gumption enough to saddle yore own cayuse this morning', or do I got to do it for you?"

And since Todd Larkin could neither see nor hear his two cow hands now, he left them behind in thought as he left the ranch behind. Not once did he glance over his shoulder. He had no need to. He knew how it looked. Memory would carry its likeness clearly, as long as memory lived.

He had only one concern now. To reach Doghouse Bend with his hand as steady and his head as clear as possible. He couldn't let anything stampede him into a careless action or a wild shot. As long as he could keep his feet, he must make every shot tell. Before he went down for the final count, he must know that Moe Dorgan was already dead and done.

The whole long journey through the hills and gullies, up and down the winding trail, was a kind of nightmare haze.

When the buildings of the town came into sight, he felt a sense of surprise that so much time had gone and he was here, face to face with the end so soon.

Then on the heels of that surprise, the surge of fear descended. Everything inside him seemed to freeze. His teeth chattered, until he clamped his jaws so tightly that ridges of muscle stood out along his cheeks and temples.

He wondered what Moe Dorgan would have said to the citizenry of Doghouse Bend. Knowing Moe as he did, he knew that every townsman would have heard some leering explanation of the imminent gunfight.

It mattered little, now. After it was all over, they'd know at least that Todd Larkin hadn't been a coward.

He wondered uneasily just how many henchmen Moe would have at his coattails these days. Three or four, anyway. As he had back in Weir Bluff, doubtless. Not that their number mattered much, either. Only that he couldn't let them prevent his getting Moe.

As he rode into the outskirts of the town, in spite of all his determination not to let the fear down him, he knew the inner torture that lashes and digs at a man condemned to die. No one would have guessed it from his face.

He drew up to the general store and dismounted. His legs were stiff and slow to obey his will, and his hands were like ice. No one would have guessed that, either. He seemed merely to be incredibly cold and deliberate about what he was about to do.

Someone spoke to him. He was afraid to answer, lest his voice quiver. He avoided looking at the men lounging along the wall, lest they read the awful terror in his eyes.

To the watching loungers, he seemed filled with a vast and impregnable disdain, a cool contempt that could waste neither word nor glance on anything less than the cur he had come to slay.



ONE of the loungers gulped, whistled between his teeth, and slunk away up the street. One of Dorgan's men, Todd guessed instantly. On the watch. Gone to inform Dorgan that Todd Larkin had arrived. Well, let him go. The quicker this was over, the better.

It was patent from the expectant air of the alert loungers, as he could see from the corner of his eye, that every man in town was agog over the coming battle.

Todd turned from his horse, and strode into the middle of the street. Somewhere along that street, at the doorway of some saloon, Dorgan and his men would be waiting. At the Red Lion, likely. It was the favorite saloon in Doghouse Bend.

Squarely in the center of the dusty street, Todd turned, drew both his guns, and started up the street, a walnut butt clenched in each clammy palm, dazed eyes straight ahead.

Dimly he heard somebody comment

from the sidewalk: "Cripes! He don't care for hell, does he? Ain't no protection out there."

If they only knew that he was afraid to walk along the sidewalk. Afraid that his panicky longing for life would drive him to dart down one of the alleyways, out of death's reach.

He was within sight of the Red Lion, now. The man who had gone slinking up the street was there, lounging against the hitching rack in front of the Red Lion. Two other men were with him.

Todd needed nobody to tell him that the three were Dorgan's men. Dorgan, himself, stood idly watchful, a few feet from them.

In the next instant, one of Dorgan's thugs opened fire.

Todd dropped to the dust, firing as he fell. The other man's shot went wild. Todd's bullet sliced along the side of the gent leaning on the hitching rack.

The few daring spectators who had remained in sight on both sides of the street, dashed for protection at the first report.

A blistering volley came from Dorgan's men. Two, three, four bullets picked little spouts in the dust around Todd.

For an instant he was too utterly frozen by fear to strive to fire again. One of the slugs had bored through the outer flesh of his upper arm. He lay entirely motionless. Dorgan's men didn't think he was dead. They did think he was too cool and calculating to be human.

Todd was thinking that the bullet hadn't hurt. He wouldn't have known he was hit, had it not been for the jar of the slug, like a blow on his arm. A blow that left only numbness behind it.

Dorgan's men stared at him, nonplussed. They couldn't quite figure him out. Either he was gritty as hell, or he was a damned fool. Coming right up the middle of the street like that. Just lying there now, doing nothing.

Then suddenly he was lying there no

longer. The fear tore at him again, wildly. He couldn't just remain prone there and wait for them to rip him to pieces. He had to get Dorgan.

He came up from the dust, swaying a little as he strove to command his fear-chilled muscles. He seemed to rise with the lithe sinuousness of a snake.

He started forward swiftly, in a low crouch. Firing as he went. He wasn't thinking too much about how he was to hit Dorgan's men. He was thinking how he could always send an accurate slug stinging into the brain of a coyote. Or blast off a rattler's head several paces away.

Rattlers. Coyotes. Once, twice, thrice, his right-hand gun hammered. He glimpsed the head of a Dorgan man before his sights for a fraction of a second. His ears were deafened by the sound of his own rapid fire. His eyes stung from the powdersmoke that blew back into his face in a little breeze.

But he saw two of Dorgan's men go down. He knew by the very laxness of their falling bodies that they were dead before they hit the dust. He saw the other gunman, the one by the hitching rack, the one he had first nicked.

The fellow shouted something, and threw down wildly on Todd. A revolver cracked in the man's hand. A slug tore into Todd's side.

But a wild exultation flooded him. He had downed two of Dorgan's men. He would get this one. But where was Dorgan?

Dorgan was not in sight. Dorgan had ducked to cover.



THE man by the hitching rack crouched low, half protected by the timber uprights. He was firing rapidly.

A bullet struck high in Todd's chest, near the collar bone. Another bored

through his thigh. But still he stalked on.

The Dorgan man had never before faced a man who had resigned himself to die and went to meet it. He leaped from the hitching rack and raced for the greater protection of the livery barn. Todd's slug caught him squarely in the back of the head. He plunged downward, plowing the dust with his dead face.

Then Dorgan stepped into sight.

At Todd's left, Todd caught the flash of movement from behind a corner of a building. He tried to whirl and fire. Too late. Dorgan's slug caught him high on the right side of the chest and he went down.

For a moment the world seemed to whirl before his gaze. Then he caught the leer on Dorgan's face. The dirty killer still remained alive. He *had* to get Dorgan. Dorgan, standing there on the sidewalk, laughing.

Todd felt queer. All numb and dizzy. Was this death? Was this the way it felt when a man died? It didn't matter.

Only he couldn't die quite yet. He had to take Dorgan with him.

With almost superhuman effort, he raised his head. He saw Dorgan.

Dorgan, certain his work was done, had turned away. Dorgan was just disappearing through the swing doors into the Red Lion.

Men came surging from everywhere, now that the shooting seemed to be over.

Todd ignored them. He didn't see them clearly. He saw only Dorgan. His brain was beginning to clear a little. From some nameless source, a little strength flowed back into him. He rolled over and pushed himself to a sitting position.

Someone tried to shove him back, and shouted something about getting a doctor.

Todd struggled to his feet, and stood there swaying, feet planted wide apart, his left-hand gun leveled.

"Get outa my way. I'm goin' after Dorgan. Anyone tries to stop me gets a slug between the eyes."

The men melted back like wax thrown into a redhot frying pan.

Todd gritted his teeth and took a lunging step forward, blood welling from his dusty shirt front.

He continued to move forward, feet planted wide. The Red Lion seemed to advance and retreat before him.

He reached the sidewalk, and staggered across to the wall of the Red Lion, beside the swing entrance doors. There he stopped, and leaned against the wall, and drew a long, whistling breath. The air seemed as hot as a breath out of hell.

He straightened, and turned, and lunged forward again. Through the swing doors. On legs that were steadier now.

Dorgan stood at the bar, buying a drink.

Todd said thickly, "Drink hearty, Dorgan. It's goin' to be your last."

Dorgan whirled, his face blanching. Both men fired, almost together.

But it was Dorgan who went down. He gasped, and gulped, and caught wildly at the edge of the bar. But the bullet that had torn his heart open had stopped the pumping of that heart in the same instant. He slumped into the sawdust.

Todd heard Dorgan's bullet whine vi-

ciously over his head. But all he cared about was the fact that Dorgan was dead.

He slewed about and went down there into the sawdust himself, just inside the swing doors.

He was vaguely conscious of excited men milling about him. He heard jumbled words: "Well, I've seen some brave men in my lifetime. But for sheer cold guts and nerve, Todd Larkin was the—"

Then somebody else cut in: "Was, hell! The man's still alive. Maybe he might live, if we can git a doctor quick enough."

Then another voice, sharp, angry. Shorty's voice! "Get to hell outa the way! We got a doctor here, waitin'."

And Patchard's grim, harsh tones: "Save him, Doc. You just got to save him!"

Then after a long time, Doc Pete's voice: "He's took enough lead to sink a bull in molasses. But I can save him. Can you hear me, Todd? I got to do a little probin' and cleanin' around. It'll hurt like hell."

There was a peaceful smile on Todd's face as he opened his dazed eyes. There was even a slight sound of mirth in his voice, as he answered:

"Go ahead and probe, damn you, Pete. I ain't afraid."



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• Honest Horse Thief •

By GUNNISON STEELE

By his own lights, the kid with the band of sleek broomtails was honest as they come. But other folks were entitled to their own opinion—and the kid was danged if he'd break down and weep when they carried him off to the nearest cottonwood.



The bandits tried to kick some life into the critters, at the same time opening fire.

IF THERE'S one place you get to know men, it's on a horse ranch. If a man's stubborn, or lazy, or just plain ornery, it's bound to come out sooner or later. Personally, I always claimed it was about as hard to fool me in a man as in a horse, which was practically impossible. Now you take this here Pinto Rand.

He came driving his dozen head of horses up to my place in the heat of the day, and hollered me and some of the boys out. I perked up some when I saw the kind of stuff he had. Not scrubby broomtails, but sleek, long-legged stock with a pureblood look about 'em. By contrast, the kid—I judged him to be about twenty—looked pretty seedy, with his dusty old clothes, his freckled face and blazing red

hair, and the scrawny old roan he rode.

He looked at me and asked, "Are you Mr. Ames, who owns this ranch?"

I said yes, I was, trying to judge him and his horses at the same time.

"I'm Pinto Rand," he said. "I've got some horses here that are for sale. You want to buy them?"

"Maybe—and again, maybe not."

"There they are. You can look 'em over if you want to."

The kid dismounted, slapping alkali from his jeans. He was tall and lean. He squatted with his back against a corral post and watched as me and the boys circled the horses, peering, feeling, prodding. Sam Conant was a top-hand, and he looked at me slyly.

"Looks okay to me," he whispered. "Might get some bargains; the kid looks hungry." I had the same idea.

I asked suddenly, "Kid, where did you steal these broncs?"

He didn't bat an eye, like he'd been expecting that. He took some papers from his pocket and handed them to me. They proved conclusively that he owned the horses. I looked at him and he was grinning twistedly.

"Anything else, Mr. Ames?"

"How much you want for these fan-tails?"

He told me, and it was dirt cheap. They were long-barreled, built for speed. I was about to take him up, when just then two strangers rode up quick and stopped their fagged horses. They were hard-faced hombres, and both wore guns. I smelled trouble.

Pinto Rand jumped up, looking kind of pale, and I realized then that, all along, the kid had been watching his backtrail. The strangers had come up on the blind side of the house. He looked at the newcomers a moment, his eyes blazing angry defiance. Then his shoulders sort of slumped, and he started making marks in the dust with the toe of his scuffed boot.

The strangers jumped to the ground, and one of them—a big, hook-nosed hombre—said, "That's him. That's our man!"

The other one said, "Well, kid, we've got a rope that'll just fit your neck."

I could see they meant it. "Wait a minute," I say. "This is my ranch, and I got a right to say who's hung on it."

"Me and Breen here," said McFee, the tall man, "have got ranches over on the Wolf Creek Range. For the last ten days we've been trailing this here Pinto Rand. He's a dirty crook. He sold us a bunch of 'painted' horses. They looked good, but they'd been doctored and wasn't fit to make glue out of. Also, we figure they'd been stolen."

Right off, I didn't like these two. "He

looks honest to me," I say, quiet like.

"Ask him," Breen said.

I did, and the kid says, "I didn't tell them the horses they bought were any good. Seems to me a horse rancher's supposed to have a little sense." He was looking right at me.

"Is that so?" I yelled. "Well, I got no use for a dirty crook. You fellers don't have to take him all the way back to Wolf Creek. We'll hang him right here!"

THE nearest trees were some cottonwoods a quarter mile away, over a rise, and the whole bunch of us hustled the kid over there. He didn't resist or protest. His face was pale, his eyes bitter and defiant. We stood him on a barrel, placed a noose about his neck and threw the other end of the rope over a limb. I felt kind of sick inside, but I couldn't back down now. And maybe hanging this button would teach him some manners.

"You got anything to say before we hang you, kid?" I asked.

Pinto Rand stood there, a shaft of sunlight through the branches making his red head shine like a torch, and I could see he wasn't afraid.

"My daddy was a thief," he said slowly, "and because I've got his blood in me folks said I was bound to be one too. I didn't believe it. I swore, the day a posse hung my daddy for cattle rustling, that I'd be honest and respected. I tried hard to hold honest jobs. But always they found out I was Black John Rand's kid, and told me to move on. Sometimes I got hungry, but I never stole anything in my life. I've been dishonest, though, and I guess I ought to be punished. I was raised up with horses. I could take a bronc that was half dead—depending on what ailed it—and doctor it up so that, for a while, it looked like a world beater. So sometimes I done that, so I wouldn't have to go hungry. Now I realize it was bad, and likely makes me

the dirty crook you called me. And now, gentlemen, I'm ready to be hung!"

Well, sir, that speech made me feel mighty bad. But I could see that Breen and McFee didn't believe it. Likely we'd have hung the kid, then and there, if old Potluck Lee, the ranch cook, hadn't come loping over the rise that lay between there and the ranch buildings. He was scared and out of breath, but he managed to explain what had happened.

Half a dozen bad-looking hombres had just ridden up to the ranch on spent horses. From talk he heard, Potluck judged they'd robbed the bank in town and killed a couple of men. They'd switched saddles from their fagged mounts onto Pinto Rand's long-legged purebloods, which we'd left tied at the corral while we hung the kid, and lined out again toward the distant mountains.

There was a lot of confusion and cussing, and everybody forgot about the hanging. "No use chasing 'em," I said finally. "With fresh horses, especially them long-legged brutes, they'll get clean away."

"No, they won't," Pinto said. "Not on them horses."

Sam Conant asked, "Kid, you mean them broncs was 'painted'?"

The kid nodded, looking embarrassed.

"It's a lie!" I yelled. "You can't make a fool out of me."

"It's true," Pinto said. "It was my best job. Not a horse in the outfit could run five miles without dropping."

Everybody, including Pinto Rand, made a quick break for the ranch buildings. We saddled some of my own horses and lined out after the bank robbers. We had gone

less than five miles when we saw that the kid hadn't lied. Those sleek, proud-looking beasts that the killers had stolen for a fast getaway, had simply wilted. The bandits tried to kick some life into the critters, at the same time opening fire, but it was no use.

The bewildered bandits, trapped on the open prairie, caved after a half-hearted fight. Pretty soon we had them rounded up and herded back to the ranch. There was a lot of talking and arguing over whether we should hang them on the spot or hold them for the sheriff. Then. . . Well, sir, you could have floored me with a pick-axe!

There was Pinto Rand, still in our midst, arguing louder than anybody. He argued so loud that we decided to let law and order take its course. Then everybody got to looking at him, and a kind of shocked silence fell.

"I didn't want to be hung along with a lot of dirty killers," the kid explained meekly.

The silence held a long while. Everybody looked a little sick, even Breen and McFee. Finally I blurted, "Look, kid—do you want a job?"

He was cautious. "An honest job?" he asked.

"If you call horse ranching honest. I need a head wrangler. Please, kid—take the job."

Pinto Rand drew a deep breath. "I'll take it," he said solemnly. "Though I can't see why you want a gent like me to have it."

"Self-defense," I say. "A feller that knows horses like you do is too dangerous to be let loose."

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Boothill's Honkatonk

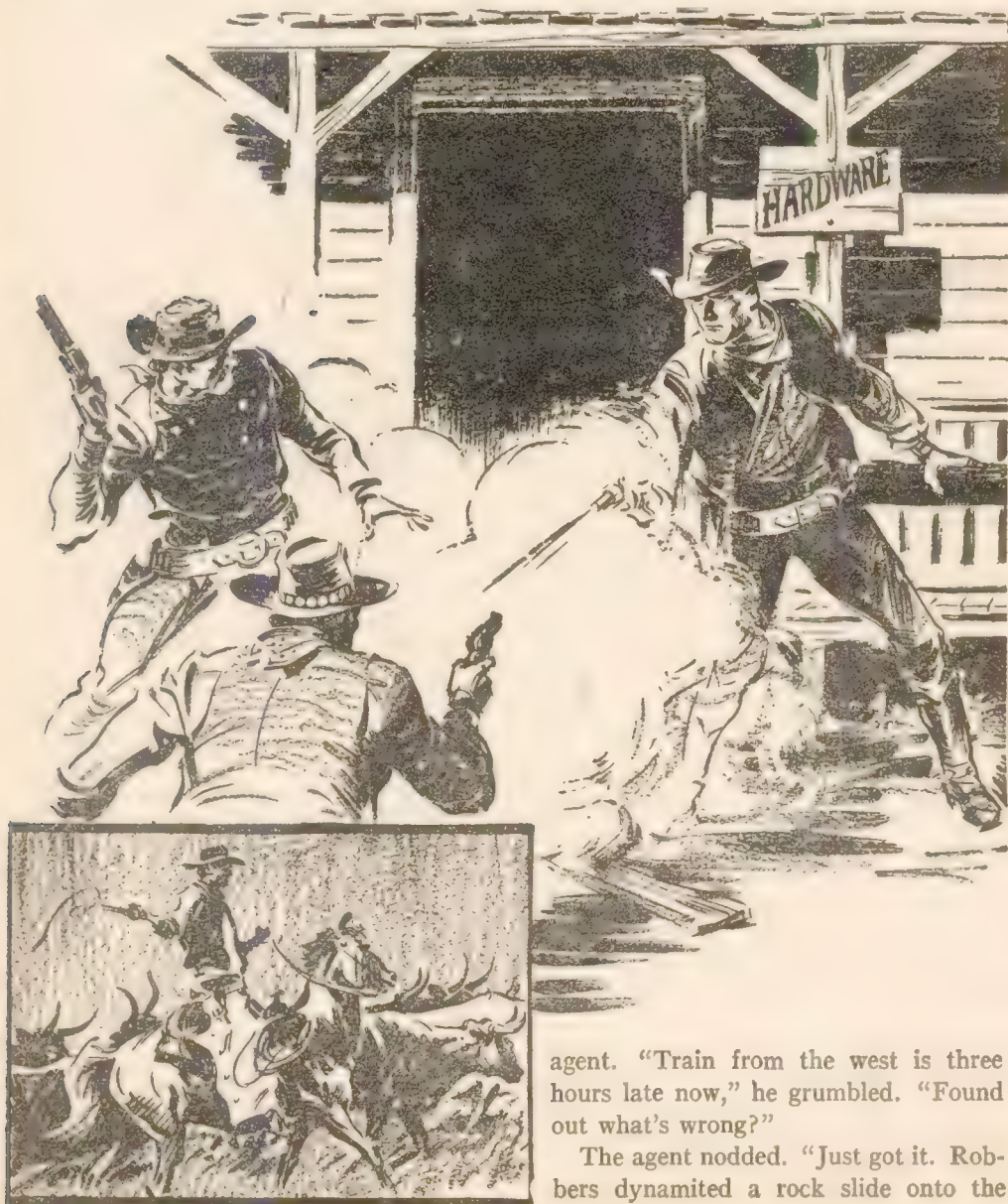
Chapter I

JAILBIRD CAPTIVE

MESQUITE CITY'S main street had more than the usual number of saddled ponies at the rail in front of the saloon, over beside the General

Store, and up near the yellow railroad station. More than the usual number of buckboards were hitched in the square near the county court house. A crowd was at the railroad station, watching the clock on the wall tick off the minutes.

Old Dal Hamilton, a rancher from across the divide, testily confronted the station



agent. "Train from the west is three hours late now," he grumbled. "Found out what's wrong?"

The agent nodded. "Just got it. Robbers dynamited a rock slide onto the

Hostage ● ● ● ● ●

*A triple punch novelette of quick death on a
gun-wracked range*

By JOHN G. PEARSON

track. They took old Krag King off the train. That's all they did. It'll be another hour till they get the track cleared."

"Where's Johnny King?" Dal Hamilton inquired.

"Don't know," the agent said.



A .45 smashed Bud Howard in the breast and knocked him backward three short, stiff-legged steps. . . .

Would Johnny King have made his glorious fight at dead man's odds against a range that had damned him as the worthless spawn of an owlhoot sire, if he'd known that the honkatonk girl who loved him—was to die so that he might live?

Dal Hamilton walked to the station door. Across the street he saw young Johnny King talking to his tawny-haired daughter, Claire. Dal walked across the road and stopped in front of King.

"A funny sort of report came in just now, Johnny," he said slowly. "Some robbers stopped the train your dad was on. They took him off."

Johnny frowned. He was tall, lean, with light gray eyes that turned a little panic-stricken at Hamilton's words. "They took him off? What did—"

Old Dal shrugged. "That's all I know," he said. "They didn't rob the train. They just took him off."

Johnny King turned to Claire. "Excuse me a minute, honey, will you?"

"Sure, Johnny," the girl said. "Shall I go with you?"

Johnny shook his head, hurried over to the station. After talking to the station agent he knew no more than he had before. The train had been stopped. They'd taken his old man. Why? Nobody knew.

Frowning, King looked at the crowd gathered in town to meet the old man; a group of people who once had been glad that old Krag King had been sent to prison, now glad he was coming back. Ready to admit they were wrong, they were gathered here together to meet him, to extend to him a hand of friendship.

"What happened, Johnny?" a man asked as he went toward the door. "How come they took old Krag off?"

Johnny shook his head. He kept thinking what a hell of a note it was that this had to happen just now. Everything had been built up so perfectly. The breaks seemed to have been his and the old man's after the two years Krag had spent in prison. A dying gunman had written a confession stating that King had been framed, that he had been sent to jail unjustly. So they'd freed him. . . .

Johnny moved slowly across the street toward Claire. Events had made it so that

he, Johnny, could ask Claire to marry him. He had. And she'd said yes. The big ranch, the money the old man had accumulated, the wealth he had piled up, had been honestly earned. Johnny was sure of this when they cleared old Krag. He had discarded his avowed intention of giving it all to the stage company to repay the money they said his father had stolen.

Johnny shook his head as Claire lifted inquiring eyes to his. "That's all the agent knows," he said. "They just took him."

"Well, I guess there's no use waiting on the train." Hamilton looked uncomfortable. "He won't be on it when it does get in. You got some shopping to do, Claire."

Claire thrust out her hand and Johnny took it. "I know there's nothing much wrong, Johnny. I'm sure everything will be all right. He'll show up."

"Sure," Johnny agreed. "He'll show up pretty soon."

Dal led Claire away. Johnny watched them go down the street and into the store. Others began to leave. The town grew almost deserted. Dusk crept down onto the flats and softly covered Mesquite City. . .



JOHNNY walked down to the saloon, went in. Some ranchers asked him if he'd found out anything about his old man; a few appeared to have an expression of ridicule in their eyes, amused at the turn-out for old Krag King; at the folks having been left standing at the station.

Curt Roan, Buck Standing and Bud Howard, all Johnny's punchers, were at the bar. "Have a drink, Johnny?" Standing said. "Reckon we should start out to look for the old man?"

Johnny took the drink, said, while toying with the glass, "We wouldn't know where to look, but we might start riding the country south of the tracks. You and the others can start. I'll wait to see the

conductor of that train when it gets in."

The punchers left. Johnny remained in the barroom, listening to the talk, mostly about old Krag, about him being sent to prison, about the confession that had cleared him.

Somebody said, loud enough for Johnny to hear, "There's a rumor that King wasn't framed into jail at all. His pals got a dyin' outlaw to fake that confession, so they could git old Krag outa jail. They want his crooked money. So they're gonna make him divvy up."

In a suddenly stilled room, Johnny turned, the eyes of fifty men upon him.

"Who said that?" he asked softly.

Gene Pardo, tall, swart, black-haired, jet-eyed, overly dressed in fancy shirt and a white hat, spread his hands in a semi-apologetic manner. "I did," he admitted. "I said there was a rumor. I heard it. Is it so?"

Johnny King studied Pardo, his mind for a moment dwelling with the distaste he felt for this man, perhaps because Pardo had always been a rival for the affection of Claire Hamilton.

"A rumor!" Johnny snorted. "A rumor is usually a damned lie! It's usually started by somebody that calls it a rumor because they're afraid to stand back of the things they let roll off their lyin' tongues!"

Pardo, his black eyes shining, breathed softly, "There's a hint there that I'm a damned liar, Johnny. Is that what you meant to say?"

"I'll put it plainer, Pardo," Johnny stated flatly. "Anybody who repeats something they don't know to be true is worse than a damned liar! Is that plain enough?"

Dark-skinned face tight, Pardo nodded. "That's plenty plain, you. . . ."

He stepped forward quickly, slapped Johnny on the side of the face. Johnny's head rocked. He grinned, a savage sort of grimace. For a long time he had wanted to smash this jasper in the sneering mouth. His fist exploded in Pardo's face.

Pardo tumbled backward, his upper body traveling faster than his booted feet. He hit the floor, flopped over on his back and lay still.

Flashing eyes flaying the crowd, Johnny King smiled crookedly. "That goes for anybody that wants to repeat the hog-wash Pardo just blabbed," he said slowly.

Silence greeted him. He turned, moved toward the door. A flurry of sound behind him made him whirl. Pardo, face convulsed with rage, was scrambling to his feet, his hand whipping a gun up from his side.

Johnny warned, "Better not, Gene!"

Pardo's gun came up. Johnny weaved sidewise, slid his gun from its holster. It roared, and Pardo sank back, clutching a wounded shoulder.

An old rancher beside Pardo said, "You should know better than try to draw on a King, Gene." He spoke contemptuously, as though anybody should know that every King was a gun-slinger.

Pardo cursed. "A King!" he sneered. "To hell with the tribel! A pack of gun-slingin' jailbirds!" He laughed, contempt in his voice. "An' that trash was going to marry a girl like Claire Hamilton!"

Opening his mouth, then closing it, Johnny looked about him, seeing the work the poisonous tongue of gossip had already done. What Gene Pardo had said could have been true. Old Krag *could* have been a crook. His release, not his conviction, *could* have been a frame-up. These men were thinking that, regarding him coldly, a frigid reserve on their faces.

Johnny snapped, "To hell with the whole damn bunch of you, if you want to believe that sort of *wau-wau*!"

He turned and stalked outside. It was nearly dark on the street. Most all the buckboards had gone. The station agent was raising a signal arm at the station, to side-track a freight, and Johnny realized that the passenger train was coming in. He quickened his step. As he passed a build-

ing corner somebody whispered, "*Watch out tonight. They're going to kill you.*"

Johnny stopped short, turned. A dark form hurried away down the alley. Johnny recognized Judy Lee, a dancehall girl in Frank Fenton's 'Dobe Dollar Saloon. At Johnny's call she hurried faster. The train whistled.

Johnny moved across the street. The thunder of the train coming up to stop, with shuddering, tumultuous sound, at the station, came to Johnny. Something whizzed past his cheek, stinging it as it passed. He winced, raised his hand and touched the spot and his hand came away bloody. He suddenly dove headlong for the corner of the station just as the train stopped, and he saw a gray splotch of smashed leaden bullet spread out on the steel coupling between the two cars.

Chapter II

GUN-FEST FOR FIVE

SAFE behind the station, Johnny rose to his feet. The train conductor, alighting from the coach steps, stared at him curiously. A woman shied away from him, thinking him drunk.

"What about the train robbery?" Johnny asked the conductor. "Can you describe the men? How many were there?"

The conductor shrugged, "All I could see, mister, was a big hole in the end of a gun. It was a foot across the muzzle, and the masked man behind it was ten feet high. That's all I could see."

He grinned, unabashed, climbed the car steps. The train started as Johnny went around the end of the station, the shadows deepening, lights beginning to come on now in the windows along Mesquite City's main street. Keeping to the shadows, Johnny went down to the saloon, frowning and dabbing at the bloody scratch on his cheek.

Stopping inside the door, his eyes found

Gene Pardo, a bandage about his right shoulder. Most of the ranchers were still there, eyes still frigid, faces wooden.

Smiling cynically, Johnny said to Pardo, "You're not so good with your left hand, Gene. You should practice up."

Pardo's eyes flicked to the blood on Johnny's cheek. He frowned. "What the hell you talkin' about?" he growled.

"Or maybe you hired it done," Johnny went on coldly.

Pardo let his eyes look at some of the ranchers, then shift back to King. "Now," he asked, "just what are you hinting at?"

Johnny's mouth hardened. He raised his hand, touched the scratch on his cheek. "I'm hinting at nothing," he snapped. "I'm telling you. I was shot at when the train came in. A bullet raked my cheek. Another hit the train coupling. It was timed nice, with the train makin' so much racket the shots couldn't even be placed. I didn't hear 'em. I think you did it. You can't take a sock in the puss without turning into a damned back-shooter!"

Gene Pardo's face whitened. His eyes blazed. "You're a liar, King," he raged, "A dirty, damn liar! You hear that? I was here all the time, and I can prove it!"

Johnny laughed. "Sure, I hear you," he mocked. He turned and went out. A rancher followed him, called, "You're wrong, Johnny. Gene was in the saloon, gettin' his shoulder fixed up. He didn't shoot at you."

Johnny didn't turn, but marched straight to where his horse was tied. Maybe Pardo didn't do it. But he could have hired it done. Who else would want to shoot him?

As Johnny came to his pony, Claire and her father came out of the store. Claire saw Johnny and came toward him, her face strained. Dal Hamilton looked very uncomfortable, stayed back a few yards behind the girl.

She said, "Johnny, I'm sorry, so terribly sorry, but . . ."

She extended her hand and Johnny looked down to see the ring in her hand. He reached out and took it, raising his eyes to hers.

"But Claire, I . . ."

She shook her head. "I thought when they released your father that it would be all settled. But this story that's out now, that his release was a frame-up—it changes the picture, Johnny. You understand, don't you?"

Johnny nodded. "Sure . . . I understand," he said huskily. He reckoned she couldn't be blamed for feeling that way. He would have no right to ask any girl to marry him—until he cleared the King name.

He stood there, staring at the ring in his hand while Claire and old Dal went down, climbed into their buckboard and drove out of town. Heavily, wearily, he swung up into the saddle and rode across the flats, the moon rising like a great silver plate above the black peaks to peer curiously down at him.

Thinking of Judy, the dancehall girl who had warned him that he would be killed, and of old Krag King's disappearance, he headed toward the range south of the tracks where would be the only logical country for anybody to take the old man.

Thinking of what Gene Pardo had said, he felt the cold finger of fear push itself against his heart, its very force so devastating to his hopes that he rejected it. Pardo couldn't be right. That would be too ironical, too grotesquely cruel. And Claire . . . He couldn't think ill of her. He couldn't censure her for not wanting to

marry him now, not till he proved definitely that his old man was square.

Suddenly the pound of hoofs broke the silence of the night behind him. Johnny stopped, turned, watched the rider who came toward him. Bud Howard came up beside Johnny, grinned. "Buck and Curt came on out," he said. "I waited for you. I had a hunch that something might happen. But I wasn't in the right place at the right time. You reckon it was Gene Pardo that shot at you?"

Johnny shrugged. "They said he was in the saloon," he told Bud. "He couldn't have done it. But maybe he had it done."

Bud snorted, "I wouldn't put it past him. We head south to look for old Krag?"

Johnny nodded, tapped his spurs against his bronc's sides. The wind in their faces, they rode up over the rim and down into the badlands, where the brush was thick and the rocks were giant sentinels beside the narrow trail. At a branch in the trail, Johnny stopped.

"I guess one way is as good as another," he surmised. "We'll take the right one."

Behind him, Bud Howard said, "Take the left, Johnny."

His voice was peculiar: there was something hard and commanding in it. Johnny turned his head, stared at the gun in Howard's hand, at the wicked grin on his lips.

"So that's it," Johnny breathed. "You're in it, whatever it is."

"That's it," Bud parroted. "I'm in it, whatever it is. Take the left trail, Johnny."

Johnny turned, started on. "Keep your right hand up in the air," Howard warned.

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AS THEY rode on slowly, Bud talked. "I shot at you at the station," he said. "We were gonna rub you out. But now that I missed you, mebby it's a good thing. I think your old man's gonna be stubborn. He won't tell us where he hid his loot. I think mebby you'll come in handy."

Sick to the soul of him, Johnny said nothing. Realization that the old man had been a crook, after all, put the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Someone off in the darkness called, "Who's that? You, Bud?"

Bud answered, "It's me—an' I got company."

Johnny turned toward the sound of the voice. When he passed a giant rock slab at the edge of the trail he could see the flickering flare of a tiny fire back in a rock nest off the trail. Buck Standing and Curt Roan stood beside the fire. A hard-faced gent Johnny didn't know hunkered beside old Krag King, who lay on the ground, hands tied behind him, feet bound.

Standing grinned. "Hello, Johnny. Surprised?"

Johnny said nothing, and Buck and Curt laughed. Old Krag King raised his head and peered from under bushy white brows at Johnny. "Hello, son," he said. "If I'd knowed that me gettin' outa jail would throw any monkey wrench in your plans I'd have stayed there, come hell an' high water."

Buck Standing explained, "We told him how you was gonna get married. But now I reckon you won't."

His eyes staying on old Krag, Johnny said, "That's okay. I'm glad to see you again, even if it is like this."

Bud Howard reached out and lifted Johnny's gun from its leather. "You might as well light," he said. "You'll be here a long time."

The hard-faced gent beside the old man rose as Johnny dismounted. He grated, "Well, this damn fool won't talk. If

that's his son, I got a idea. Might work."

Grinning, Bud Howard agreed. "Go right ahead," he said. "Work it your way and see what happens."

The man took a gun in his hand, pointed it at Johnny. He said flatly, "Brother, I'm gonna shoot you right in the belly unless your old man tells us where he's hid the money that he got from the stage robberies. That, and a bill of sale to me for the ranch. We want that, too."

A cold knot contracted in Johnny's belly. But he said coldly, "Tell 'em to go to hell. I don't believe they'll shoot."

Krag King argued, "I know him, Johnny. He'll kill you in a minute. All these gents were in the robberies with me. They'll do anything." He turned his head, looked up at the gent with the gun, said, "Okay. You win, Lee."

Lee put his gun away, untied the old man's hands. Bud Howard snapped his fingers and said airily, "Just as easy as that!"

"The money's in big bills, hid in a package that Johnny thinks is a bunch of his mother's papers and letters she wanted to keep," old Krag was saying as he scribbled on a paper Lee gave him. "It's in a safety deposit box in the bank and Johnny has the key. He didn't know it was there. He probably never would have looked at it."

The old man paused, twisting his face into a grimace of concentration as he wrote very painstakingly on the paper. Suddenly his hands shot out, grabbing the legs of the man in front of him. As he yanked back hard he yelled, "Make a break, Johnny!"

The fellow in front of old Krag went down. Quickly, Johnny dove hard at Bud Howard, sending him reeling against a giant rock. The horses spooked as Curt Roan fired at Johnny, his bullet going wild. A pony danced past Johnny and he grabbed, hung on and swung up into the saddle, sending the horse smashing into

Roan. Roan went down, yelling, trying to get a sixgun into action.

Johnny, yanking fiercely on the reins, had a glimpse of the old man trying to tackle the hombre he'd called Lee. But Lee's gun roared and Krag sank back, a stricken look on his pallid face. Then the guns began to yammer and snarl at Johnny. But he was going away fast, dodging in and out among the rocks, a poor target in the uncertain light.

Chapter III

DEATH COMES TO A CROOK

JOHNNY felt his horse shudder under the impact of a bullet. But he yanked hard on the reins and kept it up, raked it with his spurs and kept it going. He heard them coming behind him—and they were gaining. He spurred the horse again, but its response was weak, an effort that didn't last. The hoof-thunder behind him came closer. But before his pursuers came close enough to see him he flopped off the horse and rolled behind a rock, letting the horse gallop wildly on.

The four riders came past where he lay, riding hard. Johnny rose and made his way westward, but after a while he heard them coming back; so, as they rode into sight, he sank down in the brush and wished he had a gun.

But he had no gun, and he couldn't get one. He lay there, recalled the old man, Krag, staggering back, shot in the chest after helping him escape. The old man was crooked. He'd played hell with Johnny's hopes and his dreams. But he'd given his life for Johnny.

The money cached in the box at the bank would be returned to the stage company. The ranch, all the land, if Johnny could manage it, would be deeded to the stage outfit. He didn't want a crooked centavo. But he wanted a gun to kill that skunk, Lee, who had killed old Krag.

As they rode past, Bud Howard shouted to Lee, "Well, if he gets away for a while, what of it? We can get him finally. His horse is dead. He's afoot. It won't do him any good to come to town, because the sheriff's laid up and there's no law there. We could nail him any time. We can get the key to the money box and strip the range of the cattle—everybody's cattle—while we're at it. Then we can take a sneak. We . . ."

They were gone, vanished shadows in the night, the soft sound of their horses' hoofs fading into nothingness. Grim-faced, tight-lipped, Johnny rose, began a determined march toward the distant hills.

The moon sank low and the night went black. Finally a yellow light blinked ahead of Johnny, and he smiled. Gene Pardo's shack, a run-down, moneyless outfit that Gene Pardo and his brother, Tom, maintained, Gene spending all he earned on fancy clothes, Tom drinking up his share of any profits in hard liquor.

Johnny limped up to the door of the shack and knocked. In an undershirt and sock feet, Tom Pardo opened the door, stared in squint-eyed puzzlement at Johnny. Gene Pardo, getting up from a cot at the side of the room, turned curious eyes on Johnny King.

"Listen, Gene," Johnny said quickly. "I want to apologize. I accused you of shooting at me. But I was wrong. One of my own men did it. They're a bunch of dirty crooks. They were in with the old man. They've killed him, but I've got the deadwood on them. Throw in with me and we'll clean house. We'll get Dal Hamilton to bring over some men and rid the range of their scum. How about it?"

Tom Pardo turned around and looked at Gene. Gene said, musingly, "Sure. Sure, we'll throw in with you. What do we do first?"

Johnny rushed on, "They're gonna steal all the cattle on the range. I heard 'em plan it. And they're after some money

the old man had put away. They know where it is and so do I. Stake me to a horse and a gun and I'll ride to get Hamilton. I'll meet you here in a couple hours."

Tom Pardo's eyes flicked down to Johnny's empty holsters as though he had just now noticed them. Gene's eyes went there also, then up to Johnny's face.

Turning around, moving toward a pistol hung on the wall, Tom Pardo said, "Okay, Johnny. I'll give you a gun now. You say these gents know where the money is?"

"The old man told 'em," Johnny said. "But—"

He stopped when Tom Pardo turned with a gun in his hand, when he saw the exultation sweep suddenly into Gene Pardo's black eyes.

Tom said mockingly, "It's nice that they know, ain't it? We've been tryin' to find out where it was for a long time!"

Gene laughed. He said, "Give him the gun, Tom!" Then he laughed again.

Johnny King was frozen for a moment, stunned with surprise. He stared at them, knowing suddenly that he'd been a fool, abruptly realizing he was going to die.

"Now wait!" He rushed on, "The old man told 'em where the money is, but it—"

He dove sidewise as Tom Pardo squeezed the trigger. The gun roared, but Johnny was away from the door and the bullet ploughed a furrow in the rough planks on the porch. Johnny heard Gene ask Tom anxiously, "Did you get him? Looked like you missed."

Tom said disgustedly, "Hell! I did miss. He jumped just as I fired."

"He ain't got a gun," Gene said. "Why can't you go out and get him?"

Tom snorted. "He's right beside the door, ain't he?" he asked.

A shot blasted inside the house. A bullet ripped through the flimsy wall and past where Johnny crouched. Another. The bullet tugged at Johnny's shirt. A

third sang past his ear. "Now mebbly he ain't just beside the door!" Gene raged. "Go look!"

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THERE was no sound except the dry squeak of a door hinge. Johnny backed away, dropped down off the porch and stepped along the side of the house. At the corner he waited. He heard a man breathing fast, excitedly, and he tensed himself, ready to spring. A shadow came suddenly around the corner. Gene Pardo stopped, stared for a dead second into Johnny's wickedly grinning face. Then a fist hit Pardo in the mouth. His gun went off, pointing up at the sky. He stumbled backward, Johnny bounding after him like a cat.

Pardo tried to raise the gun as he fell, but Johnny flopped on him, wrapping his hands about the gun-barrel, twisting hard. Pardo screamed as his trigger finger broke under the pressure. The back door slapped suddenly open, letting a stream of light out into the yard. Tom was framed in the door, gun raised, aiming at Johnny.

Johnny tried to leap aside again, but Pardo was ready now, and there was nothing to hide Johnny. Pardo's gun yammered and it seemed as though a mule had kicked Johnny in the chest. He started to walk backward, stiff-legged, awkward, his feet heavy, trying hard to keep from falling. He sat down heavily just as Pardo's gun hammered again, the second bullet singing over his head.

Then Johnny brought up the gun he'd twisted from Gene's hand. It seemed to weigh a ton, but he got it up. Tom Pardo's black form in the door seemed to dance and weave and cavort about very crazily as Tom tried to jump back. The crash of the Colt seemed distant, far away, to Johnny. Tom Pardo falling back, to lie in the doorway with his boots half way out of it, was a crazily distorted pic-

ture. Gene Pardo, coming slowly to his feet, his bad shoulder bandaged, his left hand hanging down as though it pained him, seemed like an apparition moving in slow motion. Johnny rolled over on his belly so he'd be more steady, resting his hand on the ground, and aimed the gun at Gene Pardo.

"Go pick up Tom's gun if you want to finish this," Johnny invited huskily. "I'll give you a chance."

"I can't," Gene wailed. "Both my hands are outa commission now. I—"

He licked his lips, eyed the gun, eyed Johnny. Johnny husked, "Then mebby you'd better get to hell out of the country. The next time I see you I'm gonna kill you, bum hands or no!"

Pardo hurried away. Johnny watched him climb onto a saddleless horse, gallop away into the darkness. Then Johnny tried to get to his feet, but knew it was no use when he got up on his hands and knees.

He was a gone goose. He couldn't stand, couldn't walk, couldn't saddle a horse or ride one if he had it saddled. He sank back down to the earth again and lay there watching, with a queer sort of fascination, the pair of boots that stuck out of the door, while he wondered idly if anybody would find him before the coyotes would come and get him.

Then he heard the pound of hoofs and turned his head to see a rider, a dim and blurry picture he couldn't distinguish very well, coming cautiously toward him. Johnny pushed the gun around so he could aim it.

The rider stopped. Johnny said, his voice husky and full of pain, "Okay, come on. Let's get it over with. I can still see and I can still shoot!"

There was a cry, undoubtedly feminine, in it a mixture of relief and concern. There was a flurry of motion. Judy, the dance-hall girl, was kneeling beside him, lifting his head, looking anxiously into his eyes.

"Johnny!" she whispered. "You're hurt! You're shot!"

Johnny lay there and watched her, frowning, wondering.

"I knew they were going to try to kill you in town," the woman said hurriedly. "I heard them say so, but I didn't know then who it was. I only heard them talking through the partition between my room and the office. They came back and I heard them talking again. They said they'd killed your father and shot your horse. So I brought you a horse. I've hunted everywhere. Frank Fenton is in it and Bud Howard and—"

She stopped. Confusion came into her eyes. She laughed nervously. "There I go, getting all excited." She pointed to the saddled horse she'd been leading. "There. I guess you better get away before they find you. I—I'd have brought a horse to anybody, you know, to any good man of course. It—it was the decent thing to do. You understand."

"Yes," Johnny assured her. "Sure, I understand."

The girl peered anxiously at him. "You *can* ride, can't you? You can get away?"

Johnny grinned weakly, lied like hell, "Sure. I can ride. But you go on ahead. I wanna wait here to see if Gene Pardo comes back. He took a sneak back in the brush."

The girl nodded, brought the horse and handed the reins to Johnny. She mounted her horse and rode away. Johnny waited a little while, then tried to get up, pulling on the stirrup to help him. But he had no strength. He could hardly raise his hands, let alone pull himself up. He sank back, knowing he was whipped, knowing that he wouldn't live long enough to have given the girl time to ride to Dal Hamilton's place for help, even if he had asked her to do it.

After a while he tried again, but he was even weaker now. The longer he waited the weaker he got. He heard a

horse coming close again, but this time he couldn't see it. He couldn't move. He lay there on the ground, barely conscious, knowing that somebody had stopped, that tender bare hands were holding him again.

He heard a girl's voice telling him that he couldn't die, because she loved him. Soft lips pressed his own. He heard her sobbing as she tried to lift him, and he tried to help, but he was a limp rag, helpless, lax, a dead weight. He tried to tell her to get away before Roan, Howard and Standing came along. They'd come. They'd kill her. They'd be sure to come, because Gene Pardo would ride like hell to get them. But he knew he only thought these things. He didn't say them. He was too weak to speak. . . .

Chapter IV

A PARTNER FOR PURGATORY

IT WAS a nightmare, a crazy, distorted dream. Sometimes Johnny imagined he was being bounced on a horse, then pulled along by his arms, his heels dragging in the dirt. Then he was quiet and the girl was sobbing again, kissing him, begging him to live.

Then he opened his eyes, and he was alone in a 'dobe shack. He tried to rise and couldn't. He turned his head, looked out of a window and saw a building he recognized as being in Mesquite City. He was in town. Judy had brought him here. Occasionally he heard folks moving up and down the street. He wanted to call, but something told him not to. A sixth sense held him silent.

Finally she came hurrying into the room through a back door, looking furtively back over her shoulder. She saw his open eyes on her and she stopped. "You're awake!" she said quickly. "You're—"

That same confusion that had been in her eyes out on the range came again. She made all the emotion go out of her

eyes and her face was expressionless. "I'm glad you're better," she said stolidly. "You were very sick."

Johnny nodded. "You had a job gettin' me here, I suppose?"

"It wasn't so hard." She smiled. "I had the two horses. I just got you on one and led it. But they're looking for you. Gene Pardo has you charged with the murder of his brother. He swears you came there, drunk, trying to pick a fight with him about what he said in the saloon. He said you shot at him and killed Tom when Tom didn't have a gun. He's made a lot of people believe it."

Johnny said nothing, but he reckoned most of them would believe it. Old Krag vanishing, the rumor out that his release was a frame-up . . . Folks liked that sort of gossip, true or not. . . .

"I wonder if you can get me a couple of guns?" Johnny said suddenly.

Despite her attempt to keep her face expressionless, concern flew into her eyes. But she nodded. "I'll bring them tonight. But I have to be careful. They're watching me."

Johnny said, hurriedly, "I wouldn't want you to take any chances on my account. If . . ."

She laughed. "There wouldn't be any danger. It's just that I might have to watch my chances."

She hurried away then, and Johnny lay there and wondered if maybe he'd done wrong in asking her to get the guns. She'd lied when she said there wouldn't be danger, for Frank Fenton, the 'Dobe Dollar owner, would kill her in a minute. So would Lee, the gunman who'd killed old Krag; or Bud, or Curt.

Judy brought the guns that night. She sat there in the darkness, talking with Johnny. She asked him what he was going to do, and what about Claire Hamilton, if she had given him back his ring.

Johnny couldn't see her face in the darkness, but he knew her eyes were upon

him. He said, "She gave it back to me. I don't blame her. She's a fine girl, and I couldn't have her marry me while there's a stain on the family name."

Judy said nothing. Johnny went on, a little wistfully, "But I'm going to get the money the old man had salted away and give it back to the stage company. I'll deed them the ranch, too. That ought to more than pay for what the old man took."

"She'll love you then," Judy said softly. "She'll marry you, I'm sure. I—I hope she will. I know she will."

Johnny said nothing. There was nothing to say. He hoped that Claire would marry him. He remembered the kisses he'd felt on his lips, and the entreaties this Judy girl had made of him not to die. But . . . Claire. He'd always loved Claire. He still wanted to marry her. He always would.

Judy asked, "Can I do something for you before I go?"

"No," Johnny said slowly. "And thanks. Thanks a lot for what you've done. I'll always owe you a lot for all this."

"You'd do it for someone, wouldn't you?" she asked. "For some honest man who was in trouble and being hunted by a pack of killers, no matter who he was?"

"I guess I would."

"Then you don't need to be grateful to me."

When she'd gone, Johnny kept thinking about her. Her white lies, trying to cover her love for him. He smiled. She'd meet a good man some time. . . .

The days ticked by, then, with Johnny slowly regaining his strength, with Judy coming to see him; carrying him food; sitting there in the darkness with him; talking of his future; how he would build a ranch somewhere. Starting at scratch, sure. But what was the difference? Claire wouldn't care, Judy told him. She'd remember how brave and unselfish he had been and she'd be proud of him.

After a few days Johnny was on his feet. Judy laughed when he tried to walk and had to take hold of her to manage it. Often, through the windows of the shack, Johnny could see Howard, Curt and Buck and the killer called Lee. They still watched for him, waiting, riding out to search for him.

Judy came in to tell him when she'd hear what they'd say. And they were still waiting. They still knew he'd come back. The sheriff died and Frank Fenton had a crook named Josh Tabor appointed in his place as a temporary marshal.

Then one day Judy came and stood in the door and stared at Johnny with all the tragedy of the world in her eyes. "They know you're here," she whispered. "Bud Howard followed me. I heard him tell Fenton—and they're coming after you!"

Johnny got slowly to his feet. He took the guns from the table and buckled the belt about his waist. His legs were still wobbly, but he could stand without the girl's help.



"**R**IDE for Hamilton's ranch," he told her. "Get away before they start the fireworks. I can hold 'em off till Hamilton and his men get here. Tell Hamilton all of it!"

She didn't move, and he went to her and pushed her toward the door. "Hurry!" he snapped. "You want to stay here and get killed?"

She went then, and Johnny, watching for her up the street, didn't see her and guessed she'd gone down the back way to the livery.

Johnny saw Dal Hamilton wheel his buckboard into town, with Claire on the seat. Claire climbed down and went into the store. Frank Fenton, the flashy dressed gambler and saloonman, hurried up the street and talked to Dal Hamilton. Then

they both looked down toward Judy's 'dobe.

Just then a voice came from the street, sifting in through the door. "Listen, Johnny," Bud Howard said. "We'll give you a chance to come out and be nice and ride away with your life. How about it?"

Johnny said, "You go to hell, Bud!"

"Just to show you what you got stacked against you," Bud argued, "there's me and Buck and Curt and Lee. There's Frank Fenton and Dal Hamilton. You won't have a chance against us, Johnny."

"You're a liar, Bud. Hamilton—"

He stopped, watched Hamilton talking to Frank Fenton. Dal was climbing down out of the buckboard, staring toward the 'dobe with Fenton. Bud was right.

Bud laughed. "Mebby you don't realize just how much we got at stake, Johnny. We didn't either, till just a little while before we pried the old man out of the can. But he was the treasurer of the outfit. After we'd rob a stage we'd separate. Dal would go home, Frank would head for town. Buck, Curt and I would lay a false trail to throw the posses off the scent. Old Krag would take the money, to count the divvy after the chase died down.

"But a month ago Dal got a look at some reports from the stage company and he discovered that old Krag had been holding out on us. Dal counted it up and the old devil had nearly half a million dollars stacked away somewhere that should have been divided with us. So we faked that confession. Fenton got a killer who'd been shot to write it. We got the old man out of jail to loosen his tongue. We want the key to that box in the bank. We'll get it, either now or when you're dead. Take it or leave it, Johnny."

Watching Dal Hamilton, coming down the street with Fenton, Johnny said, "You can still go to hell, Bud. That money goes back to the stage company."

Then it was quiet. Old Dal and Fenton were not there on the street any more.

Johnny wondered if a man was a damned fool to die in an effort to give back some money his old man had stolen. Then something crashed in through a window in the 'dobe. A flaming bundle of oil-soaked rags fell on the floor. The smoke billowed up. Johnny kicked at the flame, tried to stomp it out. Another blazing torch sailed in. Johnny coughed. He stopped stomping, took his guns in his hands. He smiled as he stepped slowly toward the door, a deadening, heavy sort of resignation settling onto him. If this was the way it had to be, then what of it? Sooner or later he'd have to face them. Why wait?

He kicked open the door. A bullet pocked the 'dobe beside his head as he stepped into the street. Another gun opened up, that bullet singing past his ear. Then a muffled crash of a gun came to Johnny, the sharp, cracking report of a rifle.

With its report the gunmen began tumbling out of the saloon door into the street. Johnny laughed aloud. He had a partner!

First came Bud Howard, then Curt Roan and Buck Standing. Then Frank Fenton barged outside, Gene Pardo behind him, his right arm in a sling. Lee, slinking out the door with twin guns in his hands, seemed like a snake to Johnny and he raised his gun, aimed deliberately at him. He smiled with satisfaction as he thought of old Krag with a hole in his chest.

Then Johnny pulled the trigger.

Chapter V

BOOTHILL'S MAIN STREET

WITH the jarring crash of Johnny's pistol, the hook-nosed Lee stumbled, did a grotesque sort of dervish dance on the toes of his high-heeled boots before he dived onto his head. The gun inside the saloon rapping out its sound behind them, the others streaked

for shelter across the street. But in the center of the street they stopped still, shocked by the sight of Frank Fenton, the gambler, wilting suddenly down to the dust as a gun yammered from a building window.

For a moment they were all motionless, stunned, hemmed in by the two guns at each side of them, confronted by Johnny's guns down in front of the 'dobe.

Then all hell broke loose as they tried to fight out of the trap. They concentrated on Johnny, evidently because they couldn't see the other guns, hidden both at the corner of the saloon and peeping from the window of the shack across the street from the saloon.

But it was a setup that threw abject terror into them. The blasts of death that swept toward them were devastating, making uncertain, arrant cowards out of formerly cock-sure, arrogant gunmen; making coyotes of wolves, mice out of men.

First Gene Pardo screamed, clutched at his side and fell over on his face. He scrambled up, but a bullet punched him back, killing him before he hit the ground. Then Bud Howard started to run, throwing wild glances to both right and left, looking for a place to hide, so completely filled with terror that he ran headlong directly toward Johnny King without seeing him.

Then suddenly he did see him. It seemed as though he very abruptly realized that he had more enemies than the two who were throwing lead at him from their hidden barricades. It seemed to shock him. His eyes widened. He slid to a sudden stop. His gun swept up. "Damn you, Johnny!" he screamed. "Who you got hid out up there!" He yelled it, Johnny realized, only as a frenzied, wailing complaint of the death that swarmed about him. He didn't give a damn who it was. He just didn't want to die.

But Johnny's gun made his answer, because Johnny didn't know who was there. He didn't care. A .45 smashed Bud How-

ard in the breast and knocked him backward three short, stiff-legged steps before he sat down heavily, a limp, rag-like huddle in the dust of the streets. That was all that mattered to Johnny King. Bud was down!

Frank Fenton, struggling up from where he'd fallen, fired at one of the windows where a gun-muzzle spouted flame at him, but a snarling shot from behind him spun him about, crippled his right arm and he, too, began to stumble erratically for shelter.

But there was no shelter, no escape, no reprieve. As he realized this he went berserk, and his gun yammered incessant sound into the street as he triggered wildly. They all seemed to realize it at once, and they seemed to accept the inevitable at once, that their goose was cooked, and to settle down to the grim and sordid business of killing, without regard to their own safety.

As they did that, grimly, viciously, they concentrated on Johnny King, perhaps because he was the only one they could see. As their bullets swarmed about him, wailing, shrieking, banshee-like, to make that single dusty street in Mesquite City a thoroughfare of death and screaming sound, a bullet found Johnny's shoulder, another smashed him in the side and he spun about. But he shot Curt Roan, watched him fall and watched him get up with dogged determination, to fight some more.

As he fought there on widely braced feet, Johnny wondered about old Dal Hamilton. He couldn't see him. He wondered if he could be behind one of the guns in the windows at each side of the street. Maybe Bud Howard was a liar. Maybe Dal wasn't a crook. But if he wasn't why had Dal talked to Frank Fenton and why had he started down toward the 'dobe with Frank, watching the place as though he knew Johnny was there?

As he moved along the walls of the

buildings, guns flaming, bucking in his hands, trying to out-flank the gunmen in the street, Johnny suddenly saw him. Old Dal was standing in a doorway. His eyes were fastened in an expression of absolute horror on the window that hid one of the gunmen. He didn't move, didn't fight, didn't seem to know that a fight was being waged. Curt Roan, wounded, stumbling drunkenly along, paused, stared at him.

"Damn you, Dal!" Curt called, his voice dim in the tumult. "Git into this! They're cuttin' us to ribbons."

Dal shook his head, impatiently, nervously, his eyes still staying fixed on the window up the street. One of Roan's legs gave way beneath him as a bullet struck it, and he threw a wild glance toward the window, then swung a gun toward Dal.

"You dirty, double-crosser!" he screamed.

Curt threw a quick shot at Dal, and the old man staggered back against the door. His gun came out and up, slowly, as though it was heavy, and he fired once and hit Curt Roan in the chest. Curt flopped back and rolled over and lay still. Buck Standing turned, stopped dead still as he saw Dal Hamilton marching stiff-legged out of the doorway, a gun in his hand.



JOHNNY fired at Buck, but missed him, he'd shot so hurriedly. Old Dal threw a shot at Buck. Buck screamed something that was drowned by the clamor of gunfire and returned Dal's fire with a bullet that sent him stumbling sideways, off balance.

As Dal staggered out into the middle of the street, a girl screamed up there somewhere. The sound seemed to come from one of the windows where a gun had been. Dal straightened. He aimed at Buck Standing very deliberately. His gun flamed and Buck went down; Dal took two mincing steps toward him and pumped two

more shots into his writhing body before he, himself, wilted down beside him.

Then the street quieted. Johnny King started to move up toward where the men lay, but his feet wouldn't track and he fell flat on his face. He lay there, his gun out-thrust before him, watching Tabor, the fellow Frank Fenton had appointed marshal, coming slowly down the street.

Tabor kept his eyes on Johnny, watching the gun Johnny gripped in his hand, steadfastly refusing to look at the dead men. Johnny husked, "Listen, brother, this is a finish fight and I've got the dead-wood on this bunch of crooks you signed on with. I've got a girl to witness that they were crooks. You can either grab a horse and take a long ride, or grab a gun and go to hell on the end of a bullet. Take your choice."

Tabor's eyes were nervous. A muscle quivered in his neck where his shirt was opened at the throat. He licked his lips. He said, "It looks like I picked the wrong team. I'll take a horse, and be obliged!"

He went back up the street faster than he had come down, and as he mounted a horse and rode away a girl stepped out from the door of a 'dobe shack. It was Judy, her face alabaster white, a crimson stain spreading on the white front of a blouse she wore. She stood there, one hand holding onto the door frame for a moment. Johnny tried to get up, to hurry to her as he saw her suddenly crumple. Claire Hamilton, coming from across the street, ran over to her, cradled her head in her lap and stroked her hair back from her damp forehead. Johnny, dragging himself along, stopped beside them.

Judy opened her eyes and smiled at him. She whispered, "Good luck, Johnny. I helped—all—I could. I've got it all written down—on a paper in my room—so these killings—would not be blamed on you. . ."

She sighed. Claire Hamilton let her head down and Johnny swallowed a lump

in his throat as he saw that she was dead. She'd helped . . . God, how she'd helped!

Claire, her haunted eyes staring at the dead dancehall girl, whispered, "She shamed me, Johnny. She came to me and told me she loved you. She told about how they had framed your father out of prison, and why, and who they were, and that they were going to kill you. She said she'd rather die than see you killed. She was going to take a gun and side you because there was nobody else to help you."

Claire stopped. Her eyes were misty as she looked at Johnny. "I loved you too, Johnny," she said softly. "But I loved you selfishly. I wanted you, but I wanted everything else, too; the best name in the world, all the money I could get. I never thought of what I could give you, only what you could give me. When this girl showed me what she was willing to do, I was ashamed. If she could die for you, so could I. So I took a gun. And I . . ."

For a moment she buried her face in her hands. Then, bravely, she looked out toward where her father lay, dead. Smiling softly, she whispered huskily, "When I saw him go out there to fight Curt Roan and Buck Standing for you I was proud.

He did what he thought was right. He believed in you when nobody else did. I was glad then, that I was where I was, doing as I was doing. If you'll give me my ring, Johnny, I'd be proud to have it. I'll be glad to start over again, from scratch."

Slowly, Johnny took the ring from his pocket, slipped it on her finger. Knowing then that the blast of gunfire had drowned out Curt Roan's voice, so Claire couldn't have heard him when he accused Dal of being a double-crosser, knowing now that the reason Dal Hamilton had stood there like a statue was because he had seen his daughter at the window, Johnny lied. He said, "Your father fought for what he thought was right, just as Judy did and you did and I did. We can be proud that he was on our side. It will be something to always try to live up to—to remember."

Not something to forget, as Johnny was going to forget that old Krag King had been a crook, had lived a lie, had died a crook. This, Johnny did not want to remember.

He was glad of the pride that lessened the sorrow in her eyes when she smiled up at him.

THE END

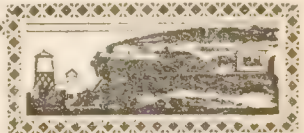
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THE BUTTON'S DYNAMITE BINGE

By CLIFF M.
BISBEE



He kicked and fought
like a cub bear. . . .

*Two grifters' hangnoose
trap for a kindly hardrock
graybeard boomeranged*

*from Boothill when Button Lew Benton got sore and went on a kid's
party with a man-sized crate of T. N. T!*

HUNCHING coatless, boyish shoulders against a chill night breeze, Lew Benton trudged wearily down the last hill to the dim streets of Painted Horse town. A yellow swath of light cut down from a saloon door and fell across his thin face to reveal a paleness augmented by something beside hunger—though he had not eaten for two days.

The loud snort of a tethered horse at his elbow startled him to near panic. He turned quickly to stare back across the dark, brush-covered hills. His slight body trembled as a whisper broke from his lips.

"Oh, lordy!" he muttered. "For a minute I thought that notch-eared hombre was right a-straddle of my neck."

With an effort he jerked his eyes forward again, just in time to avoid running into a wooden signpost atop which perched a crudely-lettered street marker.

"Linden Street," the kid said, craning his neck. "That's where Dad said I'd find Uncle Pete. I—I hope he'll take me in. . . ."

Lew's whisper choked off to silence. He shook his head doggedly to clear it of painful memories, memories that made the tears sting his eyes. He turned up Linden

Street, counting the bare board shacks.

After a while he picked his way into a weed-grown yard surrounded by a dilapidated picket fence. He had to knock twice before the door opened a crack and a harsh voice growled, "Who's there?"

"Is—is this where Pete Gully lives?"

"What the hell!"

The door opened wider, and in the wavering lamplight Lew saw a stocky, bearded man with close-set eyes. The man peered at him suspiciously.

"What's on your mind, kid?"

"I'm looking for Pete Gully, mister. My name's Lew Benton. Would you be my Uncle Pete?" The kid said it hopefully.

"Yeah, I guess I am," the stocky man admitted. "If you're Sam Benton's kid. Kind of a step-uncle, anyway. Nearest kin you got, I reckon. Where's your old man?"

Lew's voice sounded broken. "He was killed in a sheep war over on the Powder, where we been living. Before he died he said maybe you could kind of look after me—until I can get a job." He added the last hastily, on his own hook.

Gully stepped aside, eyes curious as the button entered. A tall, dark-skinned man was seated beside the table. A breed, Lew guessed, though the man's flop-brimmed hat was pulled low over his face. Lew caught a quick flash of yellow teeth in a grin that made him shiver.

"For jus' one leetle minute I theenk she ees the trap, Gully. . . ."

"Shut up, you fool!" Gully sounded savage. He swung to face Lew, rubbing a stubbled jaw dubiously.

"I dunno what I can do for you, kid. I ain't got too much room here. . . ." He studied the boy more closely, then gave a low whistle. "Say! You look awful pale—maybe you're sick, huh?"

Lew shivered again, his eyes suddenly filled with fright.

"Gosh, Uncle Pete, I saw something terrible, out there on the road a couple miles back. It—it was murder!"

The breed started from his chair, cursing. He shot a quick glance at Gully. "*Madre!* What ees thees, boy?"

"Yeah," Gully growled. "Say that over, kid."

Lew's head bobbed up and down excitedly on his thin neck.

"I'm tellin' you the truth. I saw a sure-enough killing, right on the road. I sneaked out in the brush, scared to death, and the killer came so close to me I could have spun a ketch rope over his head. He fired up his smoke with a match, and by the light of it I saw a hole in his ear big enough to stick my little finger through."

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THE breed spoke again from his chair in the corner. His voice was a soft purr. "Tell me, boy. What kind of horse deed the dead man have, eh?"

"A white horse," Lew told him promptly.

Gully's eyes had narrowed to mere slits. He nodded his head at the kid's words. "A white horse, huh? That'd be Willie Sears. He was pardners with old Hoke Myers on a hard rock claim up in the hills."

Lew Benton had lost a little of his terror now. He began to feel pretty important. "Maybe we'd ought to ride up and tell this Myers fellä about the killing, Uncle Pete."

Gully wiped his sweaty face with a dirty handkerchief. He grinned at the breed. "First, kid, me an' Sancho here will buy you some grub. This calls for some tin-star sleuthin'—and maybe you can help."

The two men led Lew down the street to a dingy, hole-in-the-wall eating place. The food he had brought with him from the Powder country had run out two days back and the smell of cooking stuff that drifted over the counter almost made him faint. The owner came out.

"What'll it be, gents?"

"Give the kid here plenty of ham and

eggs, Charlie," Pete instructed. "And anything else he wants."

Sancho and Gully withdrew to the far end of the counter, where they conversed in hoarse whispers. Lew didn't pay any attention. He was too busy trying to eat beans and meat, with nothing but a tough tortilla to scoop them up with. It was the first solid meal since that red day a month or more past when the smoldering hatred between cowmen and sheepherders had suddenly flamed into open warfare.

The dry ache in Lew's throat began to choke him again, remembering. Sam Benton had been one of the last victims of the battle that had raged along the Powder for weeks. Downed by a sheepman's bullet, he had dragged himself into a cluster of granite rocks. There Lew had sat with him, helpless, to watch his father die the hard death that had claimed so many men in a hundred similar wars throughout the West.

"I'm going, son," Sam had whispered brokenly at the last. "Promise me you'll ride out of this mess. . . . Only kin is Pete Gully, down in Painted Horse. Never got along too good with him—had to gun-whip a pal of his once. But maybe he'll take you in. . . ."

So Lew had buried Sam Benton there among the granite boulders, piling rocks neatly over the grave. Sam hadn't known both their horses had stopped bullets, but to the kid a promise was a promise. He had struck off across the arid hills on foot, his heart a pain-wracked lump in his chest.

Now, though, a healthy young appetite would not be denied, though tears blurred his eyes, and the food had lost its tang. When he had swallowed the last mouthful he glanced up at Pete Gully.

"Now, listen, kid," Gully began. "I don't know as your old man ever mentioned it, but I'm the sheriff here in Painted Horse. As a lawman, I appreciate the service you done me tonight, spottin' that ear-marked killer. Maybe you'd like to be a deputy, huh?"

Lew's eyes popped wide open. It was something he had always dreamed about. A real deputy sheriff! Funny, Dad never mentioning that Pete Gully was the law in Painted Horse. . . . But Lew didn't worry about that. He drew in a lungful of air. Then he blurted: "Th-thanks, Uncle Pete! What you want me to do?"

"This Willie Sears was pardner to a fella up on Gila Creek," Gully said, spearing his gaze around owlishly at the breed. "Hoke Myers, his name is. Him and Willie got a mine up there—a rich gold mine. Likely the killer will be tryin' to murder old Hoke next. That's where you come in, kid. You break the bad news to old Hoke, and warn him. Only don't say nothing about seein' the killer, *sabe?*"

Lew's eyes were shining. "I'll watch my tongue-waggin'. Then what'll I do?"

"Stick around Hoke's cabin. Don't let the place out of your sight!" Gully instructed. "In fact, you better bed down right there for the night."

"Ah, but do not sleep eenside weeth the old man, keed," Sancho put in, his teeth flashing. "That Hoke Myers he haf' what you call the nightmares in the night. They say he ron aroun' weeth a beeg knife in hees han', stabbeeng down eento all the bunks. He do that to mak' queek end to the enemy he dream about!"

"Gosh!" Lew exclaimed, his eyes big.

"That's right," Gully nodded. "There's a big rock about a hundred yards from the shack. Roll your soogans behind that."

Lew nodded comprehendingly.

They led him to a shack near the edge of town where Sancho fixed him up with a chunky little paint horse and careful directions. Then he rode away. . . .



THE trail wasn't hard to find, but with the moon casting weird shadows across the trail, he was glad to pull up after a half hour ride, at a small, lonely

shack on Gila Creek. It answered the description of the miner's place. A dim light was burning inside.

At Lew's bold knock the door opened a trifle to reveal a tall, white-haired old man. He drew back from the door and gazed at the kid in surprise.

"You Hoke Myers?" Lew asked.

"Yes, son. That's me." The graybeard's tone was kindly, though his seamed face wore a worried look. "You—you bringin' news of Willie Sears?"

"Bad news, Mr. Myers," Lew stammered. "Your pardner—he—he's been killed. . . ."

The old man slumped into a chair. His shoulders sagged. For a long moment he sat there, alone with his grief. Then, remembering the kid standing there, he put out his hand almost blindly.

"Thanks, button," he muttered. "I been expectin' this, only I hoped it'd be me instead of Willie Sears. That's the way they fight, kid. Underhanded. There's some fellas been tryin' to get hold of this claim. I dunno who they are, for sure. With Willie gone, I ain't got the gumption to fight no more."

Something about this kindly old man seemed to get next to Lew. Maybe it was because Hoke reminded him of Sam Benton. Hoke was older, but he had that same way of talking to him, taking him into his confidence.

"I'd like to help out, Hoke," he said huskily.

Hoke Myers laid his gnarled hand on the kid's arm and a light that was good to see came into his tired old face. It was as if a strong bond of affection had suddenly

grown into being between them, these two lonely ones.

"We'll talk about that tomorrow, kid," the old man said. "Right now we better hit the hay. No use you goin' back to town tonight."

Lew wanted to grin. This was making it easy to carry out Gully's orders. Hoke dragged out a cot, began to unfold it. But suddenly Lew remembered about the nightmares Myers was supposed to have. Maybe Sancho knew what he was talking about. And, as a deputy sheriff, his job was to watch the cabin.

"No, thanks, Hoke," he said. "Reckon I'll sleep outside. Under the stars. . . ."

Off away from the shack was the granite boulder Gully had mentioned. Lew wrapped his blanket about him for warmth and slid down behind the rock. By peering over the top he could watch the cabin. After a while his eyelids began to droop and he felt pretty drowsy. It was warm in the blanket—warm and snug. His eyes closed slowly. . . .

Confused images stirred in his dreams. Iron fingers seemed to grip his throat and pain flamed suddenly. Sleep was shaken violently from him. The strong hands wrapped around his throat were real, causing his breath to come in choking gasps. A dark shape stooped over him. Then the kid's heart almost stopped. In one of the man's ears, distinctly outlined in the moonlight, was a ragged hole!

Dimly, he saw that there were two men. He kicked and fought like a cub bear, but ropes were slung around his arms and legs, hog-tying him. They cut harshly into his flesh. The men gagged him, too.

All old Boomerang Bob, hardrock miner, wanted, was to find some young pardner to share his luck. . . . And all Kid Trigger wanted was to endow old Boomerang—with a sudden boothill grave! Read another smashing mine-camp story, by W. Ryerson Johnson—"Two Against a Claim-Jump Army," in the current STAR WESTERN! Buy it today!

Then he felt himself being dragged through the brush. His captors were like twin ghosts, silent as dead men. It made Lew sick inside with terror, set his heart smashing against his ribs.

Presently they stopped, and Lew could hear a heavy door being jerked open. They dumped him through the doorway onto the hard dirt floor. The door went shut with a soft *whoosh*. The place was windowless and dark. A peculiar odor assailed his nostrils. It was a penetrating smell, vaguely familiar.

"Heck!" he muttered suddenly. "I know what that smell is—dynamite! This must be Hoke's powderhouse."

For what seemed hours he lay there, wild imaginings reeling through his brain. Sure as hell that punch-eared hombre was Willie Sears' murderer! Maybe he aimed to kill old Hoke Myers, too. And then what?

Daylight began to filter slowly into the powderhouse. Lew squirmed around, twisting and turning until he could force himself to a sitting posture. He was staring curiously at the piled up cases of dynamite about him when muffled voices sounded outside.

Hoke Myers was talking and the kid's heart leaped in relief. He didn't savvy what was going on, but at least the old man was alive. The voices came closer and he could tell what they were saying.

"But I tell you I don't know what became of the boy," Myers was growling. "When I woke up this mornin' he had plumb disappeared."

"Ah! But you deny you keednap the below' nephew of Señor Gully, eh?" There was no mistaking that voice. It belonged to the breed, Sancho.



PETE GULLY spoke up now, his voice a harsh snarl of sound. "We sent the boy up to tell you Willie Sears was dead. But I guess you knew that,

huh? You killed your pardner—now, maybe you've done for the kid. . . ."

Lew's eyes nearly popped out of his head in bewilderment as he struggled against the ropes and gag.

"It's a frame-up, that's what it is," Hoke Myers snorted. "First I ever heard of you havin' a nephew, Gully."

A rising, angry murmur told the kid there were other men out there. A new voice spoke.

"The sheriff is outa town, Myers, and we don't aim to wait for him," a man said. "If we find you done anything to Gully's nephew we'll take you back to town for a little necktie party."

Lew listened to these words with his mind in a whirl. What did they mean the sheriff wasn't there? Gully had claimed he was the law in Painted Horse but now the kid remembered he had seen no sign of a badge on Gully's shirt.

"Perhaps the keed ees not yet dead," came Sancho's oily tones. "Look, señors, here ees where the miner stores hees powder. We leaf' no stone unturned in our search for heem, eh?"

The heavy door was jerked open and the kid blinked into bright sunlight. Sancho peered in, blocking the narrow doorway, an ugly leer on his face. A brightly colored scarf was tied around the 'breed's head. Sancho put his thin lips close to Lew's ear.

"Leesen, keed! One wrong word from you an' Sancho sleet your t'roat like a peeg, you sabe?"

Lew nodded. Beyond Sancho he saw Pete Gully, and off to one side stood Hoke Myers. The old man was surrounded by a group of grim-faced men. Abruptly Sancho grabbed Lew's heels and dragged him out into the open. The miners gasped in angry amazement as Gully slashed at the ropes.

Lew looked dumbly at Hoke Myers. The white-haired oldster returned Lew's glance, his face drawn and bitter.

"I hate to see you mixed up with these ornery skunks, son," he muttered. "My

old carcass ain't worth much, but when a likable youngster throws in with crooks like these, he's on the way to worse things."

Lew's face went red. But violent denial died on his lips. He didn't dare come out with the truth—not with Sancho's black eyes boring into him. Pete Gully was hovering around him with a fine show of affection. Then he turned to the men who had seized Hoke Myers.

"Mighty nice of you fellas to help me find my nephew." Gully was grinning. "Sancho an' me will stay here a spell and let the poor boy rest. Now—uh—I reckon you can figure out what this old reperbate has got comin'. A man that'd mistreat a kid like this'd sure murder his pardner."

"Sure," a thin-faced miner grunted. "An' I've heerd the sheriff allow if ever there was a kidnappin' in this county, he'd turn his back on any lynch law whatever!"



IT DIDN'T take the miners long to load Myers onto a spare horse. Tying him into the saddle, they lashed the horse cruelly across the rump with a rope-end. Whooping and yelling crazily, they raced down the trail after the bucking animal. Lew closed his eyes, swaying dizzily. In a minute the riders were gone from sight.

Now Sancho whirled, his yellow teeth bared in a wolfish snarl. He grabbed Lew by the shoulders and shook him savagely. Then ripping the bright cloth from his head with a sweeping gesture, he shoved his face close to the kid.

Lew's blood turned cold. His staring eyes saw a hole, livid and ugly looking in daylight, in the breed's right ear.

"Hah!" Sancho sneered. "You see that hole, eh? Maybe you do not know it was Sam Benton's lead that clip this hole. Now the son weel pay!"

"Come on!" Gully cursed impatiently. "To hell with your old grudge against the kid's dad. We got rid of Willie Sears—now

them miners will take care of old Hoke Myers for us. This claim is ours for the takin'."

Sancho kept his grip on Lew's shoulder. The kid could feel those talon-like fingers digging into his flesh. The breed's face was twisted with savage cruelty.

"Si!" he growled. "I 'trow the keed in thee shack while we look at that so rich new shaft they 'ave work on. But when we come back . . ."

Pete Gully shuddered, tonguing dry lips. He knew the breed meant to punch Lew around, just for the hell of it. "All right, all right! You can have your fun with the kid later."

Dragging Lew into the cabin, the breed hastily lashed him into a chair. Then slamming the door and locking it from the outside, Sancho and Gully started up the brush-choked canyon. A grin flickered across the kid's tense face.

He knew by the feel of the ropes that Sancho had done a poor job of tying his arms. Maybe the breed had under-estimated his strength. Feverishly he strained and twisted. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead; the rope burned into his wiry arms. But the knots were slipping.

Once the rope was loosened it took little time to free his hands. Then, stooping, he tore at the knots around his legs. His breath came in hard, sobbing gasps now. He couldn't stand the thought of what might be happening to old Hoke Myers. The old man would die, cursing Lew Benton, never learning that Lew had been only live bait in Gully's trap.

But maybe there was still a chance of evening the score. . . .

A miner's pick lay in a corner. He used it to smash out a window pane. Then, climbing through, he dropped to the ground outside. He stared about, hesitating. His eyes rested on a squat building set half into the earth. The powderhouse!

He shivered at the very thought of the plan that was racing through his brain. It

was a long chance, risky. Tossing his head savagely, as though he could shake off fear, he ran to the powderhouse, dragged open the heavy door. He pulled out a dynamite box, used an iron pry bar to break it open.

He removed one of the sticky, yellowish pieces. With his pocket knife he cut off a length of fuse a yard long and crimped a cap onto one end with his teeth, the way he had often seen his dad do. Inserting the cap into the end of the powder stick, he twisted the waxed paper around it and pressed it down tight. Then he jammed the dynamite back in the box, letting the fuse trail outside.

The box of powder was heavy, but he managed to get it up in his arms. He staggered up the rough trail. He panted up the last steep pitch, careful not to slip on the loose rubble. Crawling up the fan of broken rock from the mine, he saw an inclined shaft opening into a narrow cut that could only be reached from the outer end. Lowering the heavy box with relief, he lit the fuse, watched it start with a sharp, hissing sputter. Acrid smoke spewed from the fuse end.

"Like as not it'll blow me to hell," he muttered.



HE HEAVED the box up again into his aching arms, started for the opening into the steep-walled cut. Voices welled out suddenly from the shaft and crunching steps sounded. Sancho and Pete Gully came into sight, their arms loaded with ore samples.

With the box still in his arms, the kid began a loping, staggering run—straight toward the pair. His lean face was a set mask of purpose. Pete Gully was the first to see him; he let out a howl of dismay.

"Run for your hole!" the kid screamed. "Run, damn you, or I'll blast you to hell!"

Gully's eyes were popping in frenzied fear as he ran a few quick steps forward.

He leaped high to grab a branch that drooped over the cut, a dangerous but quite possible route to safety. Swinging precariously, he scrambled to get a better hold.

Sancho was cowering like a trapped lobo, snarling with hate. He was too far behind to make the low-hanging branch where Gully was escaping to safety. With a crazy, cursing scream of jealous rage, the breed snatched out his gun and sent three shots slamming into Gully's dangling body.

Gully hung suspended for a second or two. Then his lifeless body came crashing down, sprawling in a heap at the bottom of the cut. Scarcely thirty feet separated the kid from Sancho now, and Lew was still pounding forward, his face deathly white.

Flecks of foam appeared on the breed's writhing lips as he swung his gun toward Lew and clamped down hard on the trigger. Flame and smoke belched from the barrel. Lew felt a searing, hammering impact in his side.

Young Benton staggered. Pain flared through his frame and red, blinding rage clamped down. Lumbering straight toward the screeching breed, he lifted the powder box high, heaved with all his strength.

With a terrified howl Sancho turned, darting back into the tunnel. The powder case landed with a thud at his heels, smoke still spewing from the dangling fuse.

Then the whole world seemed to go up in one mighty, thundering explosion. Dirt and rock filled the air; a smashing, terrific force jerked and shoved at the kid. He felt himself hurled backward, driven through the air with shocking power. Then blackness descended, sharp and sudden, like a smothering curtain. . . .

The kid slowly fought his way up out of unconsciousness. He started up, arms threshing out wildly, screams welling in his throat. But a strong hand came out to press him gently back. Dirt was scratchy in his eyes and he couldn't see good.

"Take it easy, son," a deep voice said.

kindly. Hoke Myers! Hoke Myers, back from the dead!

"You're right here in my bunk, son. You're all right now. You ain't hurt much. Only banged up, painful like. And a scratch on the side that'll be some time healin' good."

"Gully—" the kid gasped weakly. "And Sancho—I threw dynamite at 'em. Oh, gosh, Hoke, I only aimed to pen 'em in that shaft!"

"Gully died of bullets, son," Hoke said softly, wetness appearing in his eyes. "We know you didn't do that. And the notch-eared breed was still breathin' when they dug down to him. He'll live to swing."

"How-come they didn't swing *you*?" Lew said.

"There was some level heads in the bunch," Hoke explained. "We looked up Sancho's woman in the shack at the edge of town, and she squealed on 'em. Told us how they killed my pardner, then used you to work a frame on me. We high-tailed it back—but you got in ahead of us, son. I

reckon your dad must of been something like you. . . ."

"I reckon he was," Lew agreed. A quaver came into his voice. "Hoke—I—I'm gettin' kinda tired, not having no home to call my own."

Old Hoke's voice was suddenly husky. "You got one, son," he whispered. "Right here with me. A home—and a pardnership! How'd you like that?"

Lew lay back on the pillow, his eyes shining brightly in spite of the dirt still in them.

"Swell!" he breathed. Then suddenly he raised his head again, his face tense with sudden worry. "Say, Hoke, do you ever have nightmares about—about stabbing people with a big knife?"

Hoke stared. Then his seamed features wreathed in a broad grin.

"So that's how them hombres got you to bed down outside, where they could grab you!" the old man snorted. "Son, I give you my word. I never had a nightmare in my life!"

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Big Book Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1941. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Big Book Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1941. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 26, Register's No. 2-W-178. (My commission expires March 30, 1942.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

BUNKHOUSE JARGON

By NEVADA DICK

Part V of the Western Fan's Pocket Dictionary

In compiling "Bunkhouse Jargon," the writer has endeavored to list the most common phrases and terms used by those hardy pioneers who migrated and established homes in that vast domain which was known as the American Frontier. Some of the phraseology is now obsolete, but much of it is still used in many parts of the West, principally in the cattleland.

The lingo of the cowboy came from many and various sources. In Texas, which was the home of the cowboy, many of the salty terms had their origin. From Tennessee came Sam Houston and Davey Crockett; from Louisiana, James Bowie; from Connecticut, the Austins and their fellow colonists. Each brought with him the peculiarities of speech common to his own locality. Together with the language of the Spaniard, this produced a jargon found only in our West.

In defining these terms of a past era, the writer in many cases has set down the explanations as given by old-timers, ignoring the rules of the grammarian.

NEVADA DICK

CONNECTED BRAND—A brand that combines two or more letters or figures in such a way that they run together.

CONTEST RIG—The Association Saddle, approved by the committee for rodeo contests. It is built with a fourteen-inch swell, a five-inch cantle, and very little "dish" in the seat.

CONTRACT BUSTER—A bronc rider who contracts to break horses at so much a head, usually around five to ten dollars for a ride out of four times on each animal, after which it is assumed that the average cowboy is capable of finishing the chore.

COON-FOOTED—An animal having long, low pasterns.

COONIE BELLY—A term indigenous to the cow country, meaning a cowhide stretched beneath a wagon body, for the purpose of packing or carrying firewood.

COOSIE—A range cook. (See Cocinero)

CONCHOS—Shell-shaped ornaments of silver or metal decorating a cowboy's riding equipment.

CONCORDS—Stage coaches of yesteryear, built at Concord, New Hampshire.

CONESTOGA WAGON—A wagon built with a scow-shaped body, and having a canvas top supported by curved poles. This type was first built and used by the early Pennsylvania Dutch settlers. During the migration westward, these wagons were called prairie schooners, because of their resemblance to ships when seen at a distance crossing the plains.

CONVERSATION FLUID—Whiskey or strong drink.

CAPORAL—Mexican term meaning the boss of an outfit, or the straw-boss.

COPPER—A man or woman, engaged by a gambling house proprietor, who ostensibly has no connection with the house, but is allowed to win, thus leading unwary cowboys into "bucking the tiger" and



losing at a "brace game". Also, to copper, or cover, a bet. (In the first usage, this is sometimes spelled "capper").

CORN BELT—The Iowa and Nebraska area, where most of the "feeders" were shipped for fattening before being sent to the slaughter house.

CORPSE AND CARTRIDGE OCCASION—Cowboy term for a killing.

CORRAL—A pen, usually circular and constructed of stout logs, capable of holding wild stock. In Texas it is sometimes called a round pen.

CORRIDA—Spanish term for a group of cowhands.

COTTON TO—Stick to, or show a liking for, a person or thing.

COULDN'T DUST A FIDDLE WITH IT—Meaning to have little or nothing. In speaking of a person who has few clothes, a cowboy will often say, "He don't own enough clothes to dust a fiddle with."

COULEE—A creek bed, usually dry. In the Southwest it is called an arroyo.



COUNTER BRAND—When a brand is superseded, as by purchase of a herd, the new owner "counter brands" or "vents" the original by burning a bar through it, as when crossing out a word in writing. He then places his own registered brand upon the animal. (see Vented Brand)

COUNTY BRAND—A brand, compulsory throughout Texas, consisting of a letter or group of letters to indicate what county the animal belongs in. It is placed on the animal's neck or cheek.

COW—Used by the cowboy in reference to all cattle, except those of feminine gender, which are called "she stuff".

COWBOY—A name which came into general use during the trail-driving days, following the Civil War, and applied to all riders in Texas.

Formerly riders were called vaqueros (Mexican). (see Cow Puncher)

COWBOY'S CAPITAL—Dodge City, Kansas, where cattle were shipped to eastern markets for over twenty years.

COW CHIPS—Dry cow dung.

COW HORSE—An animal experienced in herding cattle.

COWHAND—Cowboy.

COW-HOCKED—A horse whose hind legs almost touch at the hocks and spread at the pastern joints, which are usually long and under-slung, like those of a cow.

COW HUNT—First used to designate a roundup of stock, during the primitive days of trail-driving in the 'Sixties. A cow hunt or cow drive began in the Spring, so that the stock would reach the market by Fall, after being allowed to "graze to market." Usually it took several months to make the trip from Texas to the Kansas markets.



COW NURSE—A cowhand assigned to look after the "hospital herd", consisting of those bovines afflicted with disease, or crippled, which were kept in a separate herd.

COW PUNCHER—A hand assigned to prod or "punch" stock through the loading chutes. Cattle are "punched" but horses are always "herded". This term was unknown previous to cattle being shipped by rail.



COW SENSE—Said of one thoroughly conversant with the handling of bovines.

COW WHIP—A long-lashed whip used by drovers to "pop" or lash cattle.

COYOTING AROUND—Sneaking, or spying.

CRACKED—Crazy, or loco.

CRIBBER—A horse that has acquired the habit of chewing on hitch rails or the boards of its stall.

CRICK—A stream. Or an ache or pain—as a "crick" in the back.

CRICKET—The small, barrel-shaped affair set in the half-breed and spade bits, placed there to "amuse" the animal.

CRIPPLE CREEK—The gold field, discovered by a cowboy named Bob Wormack, which brought about the Pike's Peak gold rush of 1893. Wormack sold out for \$5000, and the purchasers made a huge fortune.

CRITTER—Any bovine animal.

CROAKED—Died.

CROCKETTS—The bits and spurs turned out by the Crockett firm of Kansas City.

CROSS CANYON—A canyon that bisects another canyon.

CROSS HOBBLE—To tie or hobble one front foot of an animal to the opposite hind one.

CROSS TIMBERS—The natural timber belt which divides the fertile eastern part of Texas and the arid western section of the state.

CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE—Dying.

CROW BAIT—A broken down, worthless horse.

CROWD 'EM—Drovers term meaning to "push" a herd together.

CROWDING PEN—A small corral, used for branding purpose.

CUART—A whip. (see quirt)

CUCHILLO—Mexican name for a knife thrower.

CUERO—Spanish name for a hide or rawhide.

CUITAN—An Indian pony.

CULL THE HERD—The act of separating prime beef from the poor grade stock.

CULLS—Cattle of inferior quality.

CURB—Meaning to restrain, also the bit used on a horse, which has an up-raised centre or curb.

CURLY WOLF—A frontier name for a tough character.

CUSTOM MADES—Cowboy term for manufactured cigarettes. Most prefer to roll their own and use brown wheat straw paper instead of the white rice paper used in package cigarettes.

C.T.A.—Alludes to the recently organized cowboy association for the purpose of protecting the interests of rodeo contestants, and called the **COWBOY'S TURTLE ASSOCIATION**.

CUT—Cattle separated from the main herd, for shipping or other purpose, and called the "cut".

CUT BACKS—Cattle rejected for various reasons, and either thrown back on the range or sold.



CUT BANK—A precipitous hillside, or sharp drop-off.

CUT 'ER LOOSE—Bronc rider's signal to release his mount, after getting settled for his ride.

CUT SIGN—The act of discovering. A tracker's term for finding the trail or sign sought, either by hoof marks, or the droppings of animals.

CUT YOUR STRING—Meaning to signify your intentions.

CUTTER—Frontier term for a shooting iron. Also used to designate one who "cuts" or goes through a herd, seeking strays which bear other brands than the original herd.

CUTTING HORSE—A highly trained animal used in driving out those animals selected from a herd. Also called a chopping horse. Once these ponies discover the animal desired by the rider, it will, without guidance, follow the animal through a herd, forcing it to the outskirts.

CUTTING OUT—Act of separating cattle, and running them into the "cut".

CZAR OF COCHISE—Sobriquet earned by the noted cattle baron of Arizona, John Horton Slaughter, who served as sheriff of Cochise County, Arizona, from 1887 until 1890. Southwestern Arizona in 1887 was so overrun with cattle thieves and crooked politicians who protected the outlaws, that President Arthur threatened to place it under martial law. Slaughter, unable to secure convictions against the guilty parties, took matters into his own hands, and rid the state of the undesirables—at the business end of a sixgun.



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A GUNMAN GOES A-COURTING

By MARK
MARTIN

A handsome, fast-drawing Robin Hood gunman stood between Rancher Bill Hammond and his prairie light o' love, until the night a phoney stick-up artist bushwhacked Cupid himself!

BILL HAMMOND saw Jane Marlow with new eyes that night and realized he'd fallen hard. He knew that if she didn't say the right word there'd never be a boss-lady on his Bar-H. But what really had him on a spot was the feeling that the lady of his choice didn't care a damn whether he kept on seeing her or not.

He said, "It's a grand night for a ride, Jane," and when she hesitated, failed to

meet his glance, then said, "I don't think I'd better, Bill . . . tonight," he saw green.

The gossips in the little cowtown of Overton had, of course, been two full jumps ahead of him all along the line. There wasn't much to talk about, so the wooing of the new ranch owner and the new railroad station agent's daughter had been a choice tidbit for months. It was a triangle, including very definitely one



"Grab air!" the Faro Kid said crisply.

Faro Kid; to what precise extent all Overton wished it knew—and a number of well-intentioned persons had assured Bill it was his business to find out.

Hammond was one of those tall, slender individuals, dark and quick, generous even to those with whom he quarreled after anger's first flare; but he was impetuous. It was told in Overton how he fired 'Dobe Sanders, his veteran foreman, for some slight violation of orders, then rode eighty miles to Mesa, rented a team and buckboard and brought Sanders back to the Bar-H when the veteran broke a leg and became an object of charity. That was Hammond's style. Also, he was left-handed.

Looking at the girl now, Hammond was in a rather bad way mentally. "Jane's mind ain't on me," he thought. "In fact, it looks like if I made myself scarce, she wouldn't be mad. Maybe she has another date. Yep, more'n likely. And there ain't much doubt who with. Jaspers like the Faro Kid got to slink around at night. Well, Hell, if she prefers a damn no-account to a decent member of society, it's all right with me."

So Bill didn't ask the simple question that might have solved his problem, then and there. Instead he hopped erect and said grimly, "It's gettin' kinda late, ma'am, an' I've a long way to go. Good-night to you." With that he stalked swiftly from the little cottage near the railroad tracks. . . .

He was still seeing green when he hit the trail for home, although before he'd ridden more than a mile or so he realized that he'd gone off half-cocked, as usual, and in addition had been unjust to the Faro Kid.

The Kid was reputedly an outlaw, true enough, but not of the mean variety. The young hombre was a sort of Robin Hood. He had lots of friends. He'd earned his nickname by relieving faro and monte dealers—tin horns for whom nobody had

much real sympathy—of their largely ill-gotten gains.

But over at Mesa, Sheriff Ed Brown had long since sacrificed any hopes of a hereafter by the things he'd called the Kid. Yet, up around Twin Buttes, where the Kid had prevented a couple of Eastern yeggmen from cleaning out the bank, the cowmen swore by him, and tore down the reward signs Brown had posted. Was it so unnatural, after all, for a girl to be fascinated by a coot like that? And where the hell did he get off at by judging Jane's friends. Hell, he hadn't even had the guts to ask her to marry him!

For all such belated philosophy, however, Bill's thoughts remained largely primitive, and continued to veer from the matter which should have been immediately in hand—careful riding. Ahead, the plain sloped away to a line of cottonwoods that marked the broad creek. The effect of the last rain was still apparent in the swirling waters of the ford. Hammond should have been on guard against the well-known quicksands, but he spurred right ahead.

An instant too late the flag of danger waved to him, and he leaped from his horse to relieve it as the beast struggled against the treacherous clutch of the sand. Freed of the man in the saddle, it did tear clear and jolt forward in utter panic—leaving Bill in water up to his waist, with that unmistakable sucking drag about both ankles.



THE horse trotted back and forth along the bank, refusing to be coaxed back to where a grip on bridle or stirrup would enable Hammond to win clear of the sandy trap. Frantically he fought the sucking enemy. One boot he could raise, but the effort made the other sink deeper, and at length he desisted, aware the futile attempts were merely ex-

pediting the sand-drag about his body.

He turned and glanced toward the shore at his back. It was a white night, with a big moon and buckets of bright stars, but no living thing was visible. The opposite bank was higher. He could not see above it. Bill drew his gun and fired at steady intervals until only one shell remained. He shunned thought of the use he might have for that. . .

His senses had become peculiarly alert. His horse raised its head and whinnied. The water, as Hammond lifted his own voice, was sifting about his chest. He called again, and his heart hammered hard as he heard an answer, distant, but drawing closer in a tattoo of pounding hoofs.

The water was licking at his armpits when at last a form materialized on the higher bank; a horse was hauled sharply to its haunches and Bill saw a little chap, boyish of outline and plainly garbed.

The newcomer wasted no time. He spurred his mount into the water and worked close enough for Hammond to reach a stirrup. The bridle was lifted and the horse back-tracked. Bill winced. He felt the torture of the rack but hung on doggedly. The quicksand loosed its hold so suddenly he went flat in the water, sank, and came up spluttering.

When Hammond began to express his thanks, the other flung up an arm. "Forget it, friend. Reckon you weren't tendin' to your knittin', were you? Got to be careful when the water's high at this ford."

"I've crossed the damned thing fifty times," Hammond growled, "but my brains were certainly off wool-gatherin' tonight."

The other man seemed eager to be gone, so Hammond mounted quickly. As they started in opposite directions, the newcomer warily picking a way across the ford, Bill turned in his saddle and called, "My name's Hammond, of the Bar-H. If you ever happen to need a job, drop by."

"Thanks," the other man yelled. "My

name's Bud Trask. See you again, sometime."

He vanished, and Bill rode on, the physical discomfort of muddy, sodden clothing aggravating his mental state. Come to think of it, maybe Jane didn't even know the Faro Kid *was* a bad 'un. Nope, that wouldn't wash. Bill recalled the latest gossip he had heard. They said the Kid was going straight. Then Jane Marlow must have reformed him—and *that* made sense.

The green-eyed monster writhed anew in Hammond's chest, once more obscuring reason. He swung and splattered back through the ford himself, although this time with greater care.

On the outskirts of Overton was Hooker Joe Delgardi's place, where those inclined might sit in at anything from stud-poker to faro. Bill remembered hearing that the Kid was often to be found in the vicinity. Why, sure! Weren't such spots his special prey? The thought gave Bill a new idea.

He held his horse to a walk. As the long shadows of night settled deeper, and the moon went down, he turned aside from the main trail, and soon the blackness had swallowed him. . . .



IT WAS morning when he arrived at the Bar-H, tired and dusty on an exhausted horse. He wasn't much surprised when, later in the day, a passing Pothook rider brought news of the hold-up.

Hooker Joe Delgardi had been robbed after closing his gaming palace, in the small hours. His dealers had departed just a few moments before. As Delgardi had emerged into the darkness a dim figure had met him with a yawning gun and had relieved him of the night's proceeds.

It was the Faro Kid's work, beyond a doubt, the rider said. The kind of thing

for which he was well-known. But they had caught him this time. Punishment would be swift and sure. They had sent for Sheriff Brown, since Overton itself had no jail or law machinery. It was a peaceful community, and Dale Anders, who ran the Overton Hotel, held the only law enforcement office, as justice of the peace.

The Kid had denied Delgardi's accusation, and Jane Marlow had tried to give him an alibi by stating that the Kid had spent a good part of the evening in her company. But it hadn't worked.

Hammond's face darkened when he heard of Jane's alibi effort. The puncher looked at him. "Wasn't no mistakin' how things stood with her, after she got through talkin' to Dale," the man said. "Kinda close-mouthed, ain't yuh, Bill? Around here, when a fella gets engaged, he usually sets 'em up."

"I don't get it," Hammond snapped.

The Pothook man laughed. "You had us fooled, all right. But Jane sorta let the old cat out. Said she'd been figurin' on askin' you to give the Kid a job at the Bar-H, so's he'd quit his wild ways; him being nothin' but a foolish youngster, so she said. Ol' Dale asks what made her think you'd take on a special friend, like some say the Kid has been to her. She put her back right up and tole us all she's goin' to be Missus Hammond."

Bill started. His expression of utter incredulity faded as he turned and dashed madly for the corral. He was in the saddle and turning his horse loose before the perplexed cowboy had so much as time to scratch his head. . . .

Night found him riding at a steady lope. At the ford, he allowed his mount to drink sparingly, then picked his way across with care. At last a pinpoint of light betokened Overton town in the distance. He could see the shadowy outlines of the clapboard buildings, the patch of lamplight from the general store, another from the hotel. He rode silently toward the hotel.

Inside were three men, Dale Anders, Hooker Joe Delgardi, and—Hammond started as his glance fell on a boyish apparition on whose slim wrists were a pair of rusted handcuffs.

The three looked up as he appeared. Anders nodded. Delgardi's face was blank. The face of the boy remained inscrutable. Hammond's cheeks flamed. He addressed Anders but his finger jabbed at the handcuffed man.

"Is that the Faro Kid?"

"None other," Anders nodded.

Bill's gunhand dipped, and light glinted from his weapon. Delgardi shrank lower in his chair, while Anders lurched forward, courageously seeking to protect the prisoner. "Here, you, Bill! What the—"

But the gun didn't go off. "I jest want a key," Bill said. "The key to those bracelets. Where is it, Dale?"

"In my pocket."

"Well, use it."

Anders fumbled around a bit and finally produced a piece of metal. The handcuffs fell from the wrists of the Faro Kid. Once more Anders tried to speak, but Hammond cut in. "I don't believe he stuck-up Delgardi. In fact I know better. I did the job myself."

Delgardi straightened, but sagged back as Hammond's gun swung in direct line with his stomach. "By gawd, he's right!" the tinhorn growled. "The man who h'isted me was left-handed. Look at him!"

Hammond disregarded him; he flicked his thumb at the Kid. "Get out," he rasped. "My horse is at the rack. Maybe it will square things up for the ford."

The Kid moved toward the door, while Hammond kept the others covered. But on the threshold he turned. His left hand delved into his shirt and emerged cradling a derringer which leveled on Bill's back.

"Stick up your hands, too," the Kid clipped. "Don't turn! Hammond, you're a liar. 'Tain't the ford you're squarin'. Not this time. Thanks for pryin' me out

of this before Ed Brown arrives; but I'm kinda proud of any job I pull, an' I ain't duckin' blame.

"Fact is, I enjoyed makin' Delgardi, here, come clean." He raised his voice to Anders. "Mister, this *hombre's* lyin' because he figures he owes me somethin', which he don't, an' because the girl that's sweet on him was tryin' to straighten me out. Well, amigo, the next time you frisk a man, feel under his armpits, too. Some folks are as good lefthanded as they are right. I qualify. See?" He took a backward step. "Comin', Hammond?"

The cowman shook his head.

The Kid paused uncertainly, then laughed again. "That's right. Why should you, anyway? My pony's in the corral, so I won't need yours. Thanks all the same. Well, adios—for now."



HAMMOND lowered his own gun slowly. It was Delgardi who first found words. "By gawd!" he blustered. "Here we sit up all night to ride herd on him, an' then—Hammond, if I don't get my bankroll back I'll—"

"You'll find your money," said Hammond curtly, "under the big red rock a hundred feet west of the creek ford."

Delgardi's spleen yielded to his mercenary instincts. He departed hastily. Anders blinked perplexedly at Hammond's face. "Say, Bill, who the hell is guilty?"

"It's my word against the Kid's," Hammond said coolly. "If you want me, I'll be back in the morning, with Jane Marlow—and a Bible job for you."

Hammond rode slowly down the silent street. Near the railroad, he turned past the dark station. The white-painted cottage in which Jane Marlow lived was a hundred yards beyond.

"Grab air!" the Faro Kid said crisply from the shadows. "I don't aim to have

you drill me until I've spoke. I kinda figured you might head this way. Jane Marlow is an almighty fine girl; too good for anybody but a square-shooter. An' I'm ashamed to admit I *was* plannin' to stick-up Delgardi, even while she was tryin' so hard to make me see I oughta play 'em straight. There's one thing, though. I knew she'd feel a heap worse if she found out you'd gone crooked, too."

"You can put that gun down," Hammond said softly. "I ain't ambitious to plug you. Not any more. I've got somethin' to say myself, Kid. This is it. I wish I'd known the straight of it. I wouldn't have butted in on your game. The truth is, Kid, I was tryin' to double-cross you, make it look like your reform was bunk." He grinned sheepishly. "Say, Kid, were you ever jealous?"

"Why, sure—of this mean old devil of a horse!"

"You mean—" Hammond raised his bridle. "Hell, I'm goin' right over an' tell Jane the truth. I'm damned good and ashamed of myself! Well, I was comin' back anyhow, to get you out of this. I hadn't figured on you gettin' caught and maybe sent to jail." He rode on a few paces, then slowed and turned. "By the way, Kid, you ain't really lefthanded, are you?"

"Aw, I *can* throw a gun lefthanded, *if* I want to, 'specially."

"An' you told me your name was Bud Trask, yesterday at the ford."

"Sure. So it is. That's my right name. Ask Jane about it some day, Bill." The sound of laughter floated to Hammond from the darkness. "Hell, you don't really have to kick yourself. The way you came back squares you all right with me. An' say, maybe you'll stop bein' so hot-headed after Jane gets in a few real licks at you. I oughta know. She's been after me for years. But it was all in the family. I'm her half-brother, Bill."



Onlookers dove for the walls and windows when the Colt music started. . . .

The Passing of Sun Dog

Well-heeled tinhorn law ruled Sun Dog town until it shamed Wyoming and brought from out of the Western wastes a lawman who turned the place into a blood bath—for gunsmoke, glory and salvation!

By R. S. TUTHILL

YOU won't find Sun Dog town on any modern map of Wyoming. But in the seventies it was a rip-snorting hell-hole. Up north of old Fort Laramie,

it huddled in the low hills near the Powder River, headquarters of rustlers, Colt slingers and the gents who bootlegged whiskey and guns to the Indians.

In Sun Dog, the district where the tough hombres congregated was known as Hells Pasture. Deuce Morgan, its boss, was a cold-nerved gambler with the nature of a sidewinder in shedding time. He could center an ace at twenty paces with the stubby Smith and Wesson that rode the harness under his left arm, and with his two gun-guards, Kid Paulson and Nevada Joe, he ruled Sun Dog.

Morgan owned the Spur, largest place in the Pasture, where a gent could find all the entertainment he honed for if he had money in his pocket. He could drink at the bar, play draw, stud or faro at the tables, or walk into the dancehall and give the percentage girls a whirl. He could buy a lot of other things, too.

The Pasture crowd ran the town and there was little the merchants on the other streets could do about it. The decent element hired marshals to maintain some semblance of order, but none of those gents stayed around long enough to stage a real clean-up. The last man to wear the star had been killed by Paulson in a fight at the Spur. Since his passing the Pasture gang had run the town high, wide and handsome.

But matters came to a climax on the night that Mrs. Coleman was killed by a stray bullet, over in front of Billings' store. In the afternoon a rider from the Boxed 7 was beaten up and tossed out of the Gem. He had gone on the prod after being slicked out of a month's wages. That evening he met the Gem bouncer out in the street and both men went for their guns. The woman happened along just at that moment. There came a roll of gun thunder and the rider went down with a slug in his heart. The bouncer died later that same night. No one knew who had thrown the lead that had snuffed out Mrs. Coleman's life, but that killing laid a spark that led to the clean-up of the town.

The indignation of the townsmen flared high. A meeting was called by Tom Bill-

ings, George Cummins and Peter Marsden. It was attended by the handful of Sun Doggers who made an honest living, catering to the needs of the scattered cattle-spreads and the big freight outfits that made the town their equipment headquarters.

All this took place late in the summer of 1876, at a time when there were good pickings for the night riding gents who dodged the cavalry patrols and packed modern rifles and cartridges to the Sioux, yonder on the other side of the Powder. Morgan was putting up most of the money to buy those guns. He naturally took a heavy cut of the gold that the runners brought back. And he paid plenty money in the right places for protection against outside interference, and made it known that he would trim the horns of any local badge-toter that horned in on his game.

That meeting in Billings' store was about forgotten when one evening the stage brought a stranger to Sun Dog. The pilgrim was quiet; he talked in a soft Texas drawl but wore a business-looking Colt low on his right leg. He carried his carpet bag into the Trail Hotel and then walked down to Cummins' store. When he came back to the Trail, an hour or so later, he wore a marshal's star. Word flew to the joints over in the Pasture that the merchants had hired a gun marshal, that the new man was taking over the town.

Next afternoon the stranger made the rounds of the town. Toward evening he drifted down to the Pasture. After buying a drink in the Spur, he asked the bartender for the boss. The man hesitated a moment, then jerked his head in the direction of the door at the end of the bar. The marshal downed his drink, walked to the door and pushed through without knocking. Morgan was talking with Nevada and Paulson when the stranger entered. He made no move as the tall, slim marshal paced over and stood looking down at him.

"I'm the new marshal," the lawman said. "Name of Jim Crabtree. They're tellin' me that you aim to cut the string of any gent that wears a star. I come in to tell you that they is only one law in Sun Dog—an' I'm roddin' it."



MORGAN wasn't ready for a showdown; he wanted to talk a bit before he called any bets. He jerked his head at the two gun-hawks, motioning them to fade. Crabtree moved to one side as they filed out, closing the door behind them. There were killer lights in Morgan's eyes as he turned back to the marshal but his voice was silky.

"Mister, yore right new in Sun Dog, an' if you look the play over a mite you'll see you're up against a royal. Now if I was a gent that didn't have an ante in the pot, I'm thinkin' I'd take the next stage an' drift. Every man who's wore a star in this town has run himself into a heap of trouble. Now, right here in this drawer, I've got a thousand dollars. That money belongs to you if you see things my way."

Crabtree shook his head. There was contempt in his voice when he leaned across the table, his face within inches of Morgan's. "Listen, tinhorn," he rasped. "They told me that you were a tough hombre, an' now you're crawlin' to offer me money to fade. Well, listen to this: I'm stayin' in Sun Dog an' I'm goin' to make you clean up or get out. Tell you're two-bit gun-slingers to walk soft."

Crabtree backed to the door and stepped through. He bought another drink at the bar, then sauntered up the street and out of the Pasture. Word passed through the district that the boss had been warned by the new star-toter and soon there'd be a shoot out between them. Bets were laid that the marshal would not live to see the next month roll around.

In the meantime things seemed to drift

along as usual in Sun Dog. Crabtree broke up a few fights without going for his iron, and as yet none of the gunslicks had tested his draw. Drunks that were jailed overnight were told in the morning to drift out and stay out. Most of them heeded the warning.

Then came a night when the racks were lined with bronses, men tramped from joint to joint and the tinny pianos thumped out music for dancing feet. At the Spur, interest was centered on one of the rear tables where the Deuce was dealing stud with Nevada, two riders from over the river and a gun-runner by the name of Lamson sitting in the game. Lamson was just back from the Big Horn country and, heavy with the pay-off, was riding a run of luck and drinking steadily. Morgan was the big loser; the gambler's short temper was on edge. The stakes were high and Lamson sat behind an ever-mounting stack of gold. Kid Paulson stood at Morgan's left but was taking no part in the game.

About ten o'clock Crabtree walked in and came to the table. He watched the play for a while; then he went and stood in a corner where he could look over the whole room. He saw that Morgan was edgy, and figured there was going to be trouble.

Then a hand was dealt that bumped the betting to the sky. Everyone dropped but Morgan and Lamson. The betting on the third card went to a thousand. Deuce flipped the fourth card. He had a pair of aces, a ten and a queen in sight. The gun-runner had Kings, a Jack and a six. Morgan shoved in a hundred and Lamson upped it five more. The gambler went another five and the gun-runner called. Deuce held the deck in his left hand and was about to drop the last card when Lamson thought he saw something wrong with the deal. He kicked back his chair and went to leather, snaking up his Colt in a fast, swinging draw.

As Lamson made his play, Morgan's hand streaked for his left shoulder. The hand came back with the stubby gun smoking. The gun-runner's thumb dropped the hammer but Morgan had him shaded and his bullet drilled into the table. Paulson drew, but was blocked out by Nevada when that gent went sideways from his chair, throwing a fast shot into the falling body of the gun-runner.

Crabtree saw the whole play, but it came too fast for him to stop. He knew that Morgan had shot in self-defense, but Paulson and Nevada were dealing a cold deck. Onlookers dove for walls and windows when the Colt music started, and as Lamson's body hit the floor there was a split second of silence, cut by the brittle voice of the marshal: "Drop them irons. The Law's talkin'."

He was poised like a cat on the balls of his feet and his gun was still leathered when Nevada swiveled and chopped down with his Colt. The marshal twisted. Smoke and flame blossomed from his hip. Nevada folded up like a punctured bag. Pain racked the body of the lawman as Morgan and the Kid cut in. He braced, and his thumb rocked the hammer three times.

Paulson's body was atop Nevada's, but Deuce stood holding himself up by his left hand on the table, the fingers of his right opening to let the gun thud to the floor. There was a surprised look in the eyes he turned toward the man with the star. Then he rocked forward on his toes and fell on his face.



C RABTREE pushed away from the wall at his back. His face was drawn with the pain of those bullets in his side, but the Colt in his hand was rock steady. He came pacing up the room, driving the crowd ahead, past the bar and up to the front doors.

"The play is over gents, an' the game's

closed," he bawled. "I'm givin' you ten seconds to drift."

It was one man against a tough crowd, but those gents had watched him down three of the fastest guns in Wyoming Territory. That was the pay-off for hombres that had no ante in the game; they faded through the door and into the street and the lawman was alone with his dead.

A few seconds later the doors were pushed open and through them came Billings, Cummins, and twelve townsmen; they had heard the gun thunder and had gathered to side their marshal. Crabtree stood bracing himself against the bar. His gun hand hung at his side, but the fingers had not released their grip on the big Colt. He saw the townsmen through a red haze of smoke and blood, and fought to pull himself erect. But that shattered side had taken its toll and he pitched forward into the arms of Cummins.

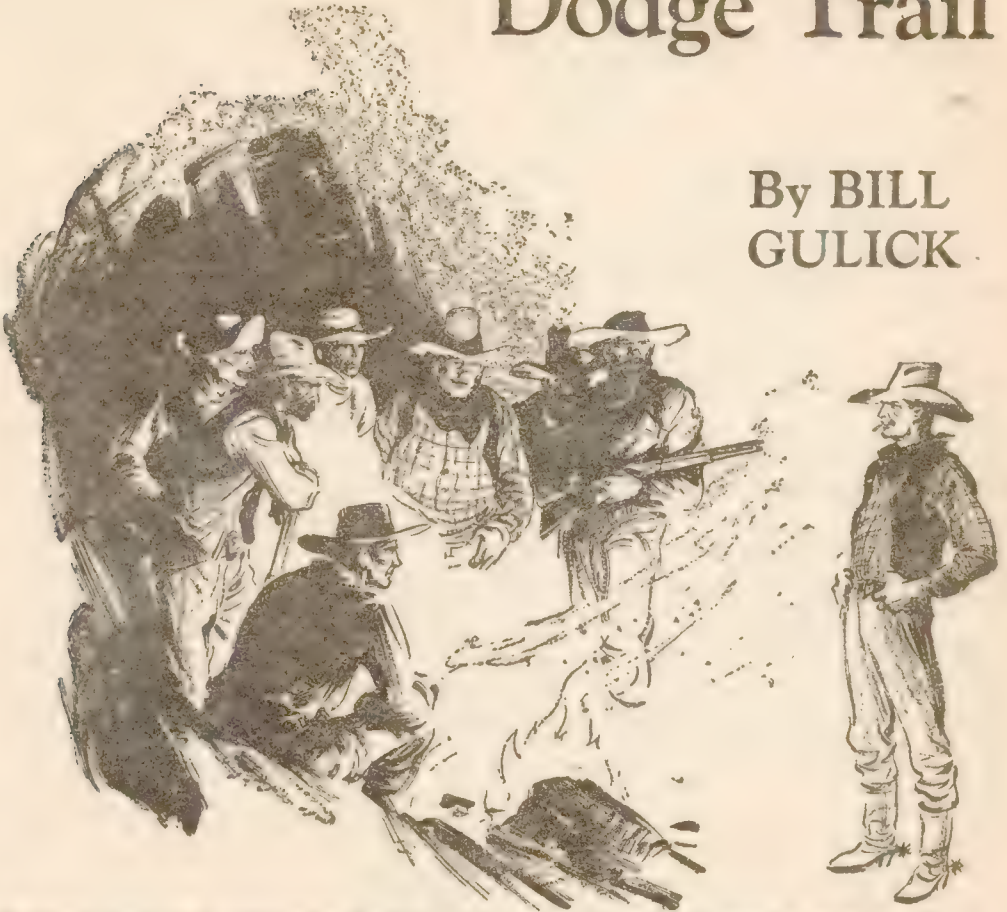
All through that night there was the sound of breaking glass and splintering wood as the Sun Doggers cleaned out the joints, finishing the work that Crabtree had started when he had cut down the boss of the Pasture.

Morning came and the Pasture was a thing of the past, its denizens scattered and drifting down the trails. Never again would they gather in Sun Dog for blood money pay-off and hell raising. Seven graves at the edge of the town marked the passing of the gents who had ruled by gun-might; those graves to fade from memory with the years, as would the glory that was Sun Dog.

Jim Crabtree, who staged that one man clean-up of the hardest gang in the Territory, was shot to doll rags. But he didn't die. He lived to see the day when gents on the Powder could hang up their guns and live in peace. As late as 1910 he owned a fine little spread up Hat Creek way, a fine upstanding old man with a limp in his right leg to always remind him of that red night in Sun Dog.

There's Hell on the Dodge Trail

By BILL GULICK



"I don't reckon," he said, "that Brackeen cares much about doing business with skunks. I handle that department."

A shoestring herd drummed up the trail from Texas, to a deadly rendezvous with prairie pirates—unless a girl's smile and a reckless campfire dream could turn a Dodge City quitter into a last-chance gun-guard who would gamble his life on one-to-three fighting odds!

ON THE crest of a barren hill, Jim Laramie sat atop his dun and watched the long string of cattle trailing northwest in the valley below. His face mirrored the bitter memories which sight of the herd brought back. Five years ago he'd trailed north to Dodge with a herd such as this one. Now he was riding the long trail across the Nation in the other direction.

Back in Dodge, he knew, they'd be saying Black Joe Crossman had run him out. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was to keep riding.

He spurred the dun down the slope and trotted toward the chuck wagon moving along behind the cattle. That herd was headed for a cattle boneyard, he knew. He'd warn the trail boss and then be drifting on.

Riding alongside the chuck wagon, he found a tall, lean Texan, a man of middle age, seamed of face and with white streaks in the hair showing beneath his hat brim. Driving the wagon was a woman, also middle-aged, with hands as hard and brown as a man's.

Jim touched his sombrero to the woman, then spoke to the Texan. "You bossing this herd?"

The man reined up. "These are my cattle. Dave Brackeen's the name. Lately of the Brazos country."

Jim shook his hand and introduced himself. He rolled a cigarette. "First time up the trail?"

"And the last, I hope. We been through pure hell. Everything from quicksand to Comanches."

"You're headed for a worse kind of hell the direction you're going now. There ain't a drop of water in a hundred miles."

Brackeen's face became perplexed. "Funny. Yesterday mornin' we met a fella who told us to come this way. Said everything due north was dried up, but that we'd strike water this direction come daylight tomorrow."

"What did this hombre look like?"

"Sort of heavy-set. Big nose, an' one ear that looked like a badger had been chewin' on it. You know him?"

Jim nodded. He knew him, all right. His name was Twist-Ear. Brackeen's sharp eyes searched his face, and Jim met the scrutiny without wavering.

Finally, Brackeen said, "Who am I supposed to believe—you or him?"

Jim shrugged indifferently. "Suit yourself."

There was a silence in which the only sounds were the creaking of saddle leather as the horses shifted about, the rumbling of the slow moving cattle's hoofs, and the moaning of the dying south wind. At last, Brackeen said softly, "I'll take your word, Laramie. Come to think of it, that fella yesterday had a mangy look."

He wheeled his horse and went off at a long lope to give orders to the point men. Sucking at his cigarette, Jim lounged in the saddle and watched the herd swing around. He guessed there were around five hundred four-year-old steers in the herd. Brackeen certainly had a small crew to handle it. Besides Brackeen himself, Jim could see only two hands—one, a Mexican, old and not much used to the saddle from the stiff way in which he rode; the other, a slim youth who looked to be no more than a boy.

When the herd was strung out in the new direction, Brackeen came back to where Jim sat. He took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I'm sure obliged to you, Laramie. Reckon we won't have any trouble from here on."

Jim knew better. In the two weeks' driving between here and Dodge there were plenty kinds of trouble. The Canadian and Cimarron were yet to be crossed, savage Comanches were on the prowl; not to mention Crossman's gang of renegades which preyed on small outfits such as this. But it wasn't Jim's affair. Let Brackeen find out for himself.

"Ridin' far?" Brackeen asked casually.

Jim shifted in his saddle and gazed toward the western horizon. "Just ridin'."

"Better have chuck with us tonight."

Jim hesitated. He'd been living on corn meal and water for the last week. In fact, ever since he'd ridden out of Dodge rather than face Black Joe Crossman when the renegade had boasted he was gunning for him. A square meal would sort of line a man's stomach for the long, lonely trail ahead.

"Thanks. Don't care if I do."

Around the fire after supper, Jim sat silently gazing into the orange flames, in the unwavering way which men acquire when they're used to making lone camps. The Mexican came in to eat after the herd was bedded down, and Jim learned

his name was Sancho. He was old and wrinkled and bent, with the bearing of a household servant rather than a cowhand.

Brackeen spoke of him affectionately. "Sancho is like one of the family. He moved in on us when ma and me first settled in the Brazos country thirty years ago. He don't savvy cows much, but he insisted on comin' along when we got burned out an' started up trail."

Jim glanced sharply at Brackeen. "Burned out?"

The Texan passed a hand over his eyes in a tired gesture, as if remembering was painful. "Comanches. They're raisin' hell south of Red River these days. The politicians in Washington have pulled all the troops out—figurin' to punish us for losin' the war, I reckon."

Brackeen fell silent and Jim questioned him no more. Now he understood why the crew was so small. Brackeen and his family were moving back to civilization after a bitter failure on the frontier, heading up to Dodge with the few cattle salvaged from what had probably been a large ranch. Sitting stooped and apathetic, Brackeen had the look of a broken man in his eyes, as if he saw in the dying fire all his labors of the last thirty years turned to ashes.

There was nothing Jim could say. He'd seen it happen before, and so long as there were frontiers and savages and a blind, vengeful government in Washington, it would keep on happening.



SANCHO finished his meal and rode off to relieve the slim cowboy. When the youth came into the firelight, Brackeen's face brightened. He introduced Jim. "This is my boy, Terry."

Jim stood up and put out his hand. A slim brown hand grasped it, and he suddenly realized he was staring into the tanned, smiling face of a girl. Long curls

cascaded from under her hat, and her eyes were blue and friendly.

"Glad to know you," he stammered, "but I thought—"

She laughed. "Dad calls me a boy sometimes. Guess he's ashamed of having a daughter."

Brackeen turned away and walked over to the other side of the fire, where his wife was sitting. The girl's eyes followed him tenderly. She helped herself to a plateful of frijoles from an iron pot and sat down beside Jim. In a lower voice, she said, "The real reason dad calls me a boy, is because sometimes he forgets that my brothers are dead. You see, they were killed two months ago when the Indians burned us out."

Jim suddenly felt a sympathy for Brackeen. For a moment, he recalled the utter loneliness he had known when, as a boy of ten, he had returned home from a trip to town to find his parents' cabin burned and his own father and mother dead from savage arrows. He looked across at Brackeen and his wife and felt that he understood something of what they were going through.

Somber-eyed, he stared down into the flames. He'd traveled a long and lonely trail since his parents were killed. He'd learned to take care of himself, and he'd made the name Jim Laramie one that men—gun-fighting men—knew and respected. In these last five years he'd used his guns for his own purposes. Now, he reckoned, he'd use them for somebody else.

He reckoned if Dave Brackeen would have him, he'd be heading north with a trail herd again. . . .

Short-handed as the crew was, there was no splitting up of the night-herding in two-hour shifts. That night, Jim and Terry were to stay with the herd till midnight, then Dave Brackeen and Sancho would take over till dawn. Riding slowly about the herd in the weird light of a half-

moon, Jim figured there wouldn't be any second shift tonight. The cattle weren't in a mood to stay bedded down long; their bellies were empty of grass and water, and already they were showing signs of restlessness.

Jim sang as he rode, an old, wordless song meant to keep disturbing sounds from the nervous herd's ears. Sometimes he could hear Terry's voice, full and rich on the night air.

Close to midnight, a restless bay steer lumbered to his feet and started moving around, bawling hoarsely. Jim knew it was coming then. One by one, then in groups, the cattle got to their feet and milled around. The bawling became a deafening chorus.

Between his knees, Jim felt the dun tremble. The cow-wise horse sensed a run coming. Then with no warning, the bunched herd broke. It roared north in a long run that made the earth shake with pounding feet. Jim kicked the dun out in front of the mass of tossing horns and stayed there, pushing his mount hard to keep ahead of the charging cattle. It wasn't a stampede yet, but it was close to it. A solid wall of men couldn't hold those steers now, he knew; all you could do was let them run, and hope you could hold them down some.

Over to his left Jim suddenly saw Terry, lying low on her pony's neck, swinging around to the front of the herd. He reined over toward her.

"Get in the clear!" he shouted. "If your horse falls you wouldn't have a chance!"

Angrily, she shook her head. "Neither would you. I'm staying."

There was nothing more he could say or do. Helpless, he watched her slow her pony down until the herd was pressing on its very heels. He did the same with the dun. At first he thought the cattle were going to break past. Then the big bay steer, which evidently was one of the herd leaders, swung in behind Terry's horse and

stayed there, matching the pony's gait stride for stride. Jim sensed the whole herd coming under control, strung out now in a straight run.

He pulled over beside the girl and yelled. "Keep headed due north. At this rate we'll reach water in a couple of hours."

She nodded without trying to speak. She glanced up at the sky and lined her direction on the unwavering north star. Jim felt a surge of admiration. She'd do to take along.

When Brackeen rode up with Sancho at dawn, he found the herd held loosely on the creek bank, grazing on the deep rich grass which grew there. He shook his head in amazement. "Nice work, Laramie. I thought they were long-gone for sure."

"Don't thank me," Jim said. "That 'boy' of yours is the ridin'est fool I ever saw." Brackeen glanced at Terry and grinned.

"Best hand I ever had," he said softly.



JIM began to breathe a little easier when they'd crossed the Canadian without sighting a single Comanche brave. He didn't figure they'd have any Indian trouble now—not this far north. But there were other troubles. For a while he tried to kid himself into believing that Black Joe Crossman and his crew wouldn't show up. Reason told him better. Twist-Ear, the man who'd directed Brackeen onto the desert trail, certainly wouldn't have failed to report to his boss. Chances were Crossman knew every move the herd had made.

That evening after supper, Jim called Brackeen out of earshot of the rest of the family. "Remember the hombre who put you on the dry trail?" he said bluntly.

Brackeen nodded. "What about him?"

"He didn't do it because he was ignorant of the country. It was deliberate."

Brackeen's eyes narrowed. "What use

would anybody have for a herd dying of thirst?"

"Hides," Jim said briefly. "The hombre's name is Twist-Ear. He's a sidekick of a cut-throat named Black Joe Crossman. They do a regular business waylaying small outfits crossing the Nation. They've also got a side line smuggling rifles to the Comanches. If they can lure a herd off the beaten path, it's no trouble at all to get Indians to skin the cattle for them and help haul the hides to market for promise of a few rifles. Hides these days are worth almost as much as cattle on the hoof."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Brackeen snapped.

"Didn't figure it was necessary."

"You figure we'll run across this gang again?"

"Like as not."

Brackeen looked out into the darkness in the direction of the sleeping herd. All his worldly goods were there. Jim knew, all he had with which to make a new start. Slowly, Brackeen said, "Laramie, how do you happen to know so much about this gang?"

Jim deliberately turned away and stared up at the clear night sky.

"Well?" Brackeen said.

Jim looked him squarely in the eye. "Guess you'll just have to take for granted it's so." Then he turned on his heel and walked away.

Jim could tell from the grimness of the others during the next few days that Dave Brackeen had told them to expect trouble. The long Spanish knife in Sancho's belt took on a new gleam, and in his spare time the faithful servant whetted it at every opportunity. Ma Brackeen drove the chuck wagon, with an old muzzle-loading rifle lying loaded and ready in the seat beside her. Terry wore one of her father's Colts. Jim knew she could use it.

But he knew, too, that all the force Brackeen could muster would be pitifully inadequate against the deadly killers who

ran with Black Joe. Men like Twist-Ear and Missouri and Black Joe himself. Jim had had dealings with them all, more than it was pleasant to remember.

When they were a good four days drive south of the Cimarron, Jim saw, late one afternoon, a small band of Indians top a rise to the west and trot toward the chuck wagon. It was apparently a friendly group—an old brave, his squaw, and two young boys—but Jim took no chances. He left the point and galloped back to the wagon just as the savages reached it.

Dave Brackeen, rifle leveled at his waist, was facing them.

"Stop right where you are, you red polecats. I don't know what you're figurin' to do, but I know I'd rather kill you than look at you."

The band stopped. Jim knew from the blank expression on the old brave's face that he understood no English. But he understood the gun well enough.

"Let me talk to them, Brackeen. They don't savvy you."

In Comanche, he asked the brave what they wanted. Fierce pride showed in the savage's face. He spoke with slow dignity. He wanted beef. His family had not eaten meat for many days. And they needed hide with which to make moccasins.

When he had finished, Jim translated for Brackeen.

The Texan's face grew hard. "Tell 'em we got no beeves to spare. Tell 'em if they don't skedaddle I'll shoot 'em down where they stand."

Jim shook his head gravely. "Comanches don't beg unless they're desperate. Better give them what they want."

"I'll give them nothing!" Brackeen roared. "In two days after I gave them a beef, the whole tribe would be down on me begging. I'll give them a bullet apiece, though, right in the belly. Maybe they can make a meal on lead."

Jim's jaw muscles worked. There was hunger in the eyes of these savages. Give

them food and they would go their way in peace; deny them, and they'd fight.

"Brackeen," he said, in desperation, "I've never led you wrong yet. You've still got a long trail ahead. Somewhere up-trail you're going to be needing all the gun-help you can get. But so help me, if you don't give these Indians food, I'll ride off and leave you cold."

The anger in Brackeen's eyes slowly changed to amazement. Then it left and there was only contempt. He lowered the gun.

"I'd probably be better off without you. But, all right—give 'em what they want."

Face colorless, Jim cut out a foot-sore steer from the rear of the herd and gave it to the Comanches. The two boys hazed it off and the squaw followed. The brave lingered behind a moment.

Thanks was a word alien to his vocabulary. But he drew himself up tall and straight and said, "Running Crow will not forget."

Then he turned his pony about and rode off over the hill. Jim gazed after him, smiling wryly. "Some of them are good," he murmured, "and some are bad. And only the Almighty or the Satan that made them can tell which is what."



THE trouble Jim was looking for came sooner than expected. That evening, after the herd had been bedded down on well-filled bellies, he rode toward the fire and supper when Terry relieved him. He staked his horse a few yards away from the chuck wagon and was walking toward the circle of light when he heard voices raised in argument.

Blood pounded hard in his ears. That was Black Joe Crossman's voice. He crept up to the shadow in the rear of the chuck wagon, where he could see without being seen.

Crossman, a dark, bear of a man, stood

facing Dave Brackeen, backed up by his segundo, Twist-Ear. "Just thought I'd warn you, stranger," he was saying, "that you've got some dangerous territory to cross between here and Dodge."

Brackeen's lean face was without emotion. "We've come this far alone. I reckon we can make it the rest of the way."

Crossman smiled. "You've got a mighty small outfit. You're going to be needing some protection. Now, the herds that my boys and me escort never lose a head."

"Except," Brackeen cut in acidly, "what they lose to you."

Crossman's eyes glittered. "Of course," he said softly, "we take a small fee. Our price for you will be one hundred and fifty head."

A strange thing was happening to Jim Laramie. Twice his hand moved downward as if to touch the gun on his hip; twice it stopped. He didn't know why. He had ridden out of Dodge, he'd told himself that night, because he was sick of the old way of life. Now, though, he wasn't so sure. He was beginning to wonder if it had been something more.

Sweat beaded his forehead. If he walked into that circle of light, he'd have to do it with gun blazing. And he wasn't sure he had the nerve.

Brackeen had been silent for a full five seconds. He moved threateningly toward Crossman. "Get out." His voice was thick with anger. "I'd see every head I got dead before I'd turn one steer over to you."

Crossman's face got ugly. Twist-Ear said something to him in a low voice, and he nodded. Suddenly guns flashed in their hands, the firelight glittering on shining steel.

"Come to think of it," Crossman said, "one hundred and fifty head won't be enough. We'll just take over the whole herd, here and now."

Brackeen stood frozen. Jim saw Sancho move forward, a strange, passionate gleam in his eyes. His hand hovered close to the

long knife in his belt. Brackeen's hand moved toward his gun.

"Wouldn't try it if I were you," Crossman said. "I don't often miss."

Jim Laramie knew that now was the time when he should step in. His hand closed on the butt of the Colt.

Then, with the suddenness of a thunderclap, a heavy caliber gun roared from the front of the chuck wagon. Crossman's weapon went spinning away. Twist-Ear, mouth gaping in amazement, wheeled uncertainly. Like a springing panther, Sancho took two long leaps forward, his knife gleaming. Twist-Ear went down and screams of mortal fear issued from his lips as Sancho held the keen edge tight against his throat.

"Shall I geeve eet maybe one leetle poosh?" Sancho said gently.

Brackeen, gun in hand, moved forward and jammed the barrel into Crossman's stomach. "Take your sidekick and start ridin' before I turn Sancho loose on him. I got half a mind to do it, anyhow, an' then borrow his knife and carve you up."

Sancho disarmed Twist-Ear and stood up with reluctance. Sadly, he said, "I should have cut his throat first, and then asked you would it be all right."

"Yeah," Brackeen grunted. "You should have."

The two renegades wasted no time finding their horses and galloping off. Then from the wagon came sounds of violent sobbing. Jim saw Ma Brackeen sitting there, the big muzzle-loader cradled in her arms.

Dave Brackeen patted her shoulder soothingly. "Now, Ma, there's no need of bawling. You didn't kill him."

The sobbing stopped for a moment. "I know it. That's why I'm so mad. This gun never would shoot straight."

Jim bestirred himself then, and walked into the circle of light. He was shaking so he could hardly pick up a plate and tin cup. "What happened?" he asked.

Brackeen told him, and his eyes searched deep. Jim didn't meet them. He stared down at his food and gulped at the steaming coffee. Brackeen said, "Where were you while all this was happening?"

"Coming in from the herd," Jim mumbled. "Wish I'd got here sooner."

Brackeen contemplated him a moment longer, then murmured, "I wonder. I just wonder."



JIM LARAMIE wondered, too, during all that next day. He knew Crossman wasn't finished, that he'd be back, and he wondered if then, when the showdown came, he'd have nerve to face him.

Toward evening, he saw a lone brave loping across the prairie toward him. He pulled away from the herd and went to meet the savage. It was Running Crow, the Comanche who had been given the beef. His message was brief. In the rough country just south of the Cimarron, he'd seen men, half a dozen of them, preparing to stampede the herd when it reached the river. The men were led, he said, by the big man who walked like a bear.

Grimly, Jim waited until he had finished. Then he said, "Can you help us fight?"

Running Crow shook his head. "What good is an old brave such as I? I can only warn you."

Jim nodded and soberly watched the Comanche ride off. This time, he knew, Crossman would do a good job. And against so many guns, Brackeen's outfit wouldn't stand a chance.

Brackeen knew it, too. When Jim relayed the Indian's story, Brackeen nodded curtly. "I been expecting it. Sancho and me should have finished the job last night."

"What do you figure on doing?"

"Do?" Brackeen gave a bitter laugh.

"Keep right on trailing north. We'll give Crossman a fight if that's what he wants." He was silent a moment. "No need of you getting mixed up in this 'less you want to."

"I reckon," Jim said softly, "that I'll hang around."

They bedded the cattle down two nights later a good half-day's drive south of the Cimarron. Jim ate supper and then went out to the herd to relieve Terry. In the darkness he heard her singing softly.

"Looks like a quiet night," she said when he approached.

"It's on quiet nights that things happen."

She laughed and rode off toward the chuck wagon. Jim felt a strange warmth inside as he watched her go. During these last two weeks he'd come to know her pretty well. They'd worked together through the long, hard days, ridden long vigils together at night. He'd seen her do a man's job hour after hour without complaint.

If a man ever took a notion to settle down, he thought. If things ever turned out so he could settle down. . . . He stopped right there. What business did he have toying with such ideas?

The hours dragged slowly by. The herd stayed quiet. Occasionally, a steer would lumber to his feet, move around a bit to find a new piece of ground, and then lie down on his other side. The far-away sound of a coyote calling could be heard every now and then, too distant to disturb the herd. Tonight reminded Jim of those nights long years ago when he'd been an eager kid riding up-trail to Dodge.

Suddenly the ears of the dun quivered. Watching them, Jim felt a strange sense of premonition. He listened, and heard the faint nickering of horses over in the direction of the chuck wagon. Something was wrong; he could sense it. He looked at the herd. It would stay quiet for a while without watching. He reined the dun about and moved toward the firelight.

Two hundred yards away, he dismounted and ground-tied the dun. He walked softly. When he was still in the shadows, he saw the men. There were half a dozen of them: Black Joe Crossman, Twist-Ear—all the rest.

A coldness flowed over Jim. Crossman must have decided not to wait until the herd reached the river. And he'd caught Brackeen flat-footed.

The Texan's gun and belt hung over one of the wagon wheels, half a dozen feet from where he stood. Terry was unarmed; Sancho had only the knife in his belt. Brackeen's wife wasn't in sight.

Jim knew it would be like murdering Brackeen to start firing at the renegades now. For they'd shoot at the first targets they saw—and those targets would be Brackeen, Sancho, and Terry. He'd have to play it another way.

Quietly, he moved forward. In three strides he was standing clearly outlined in the firelight, facing Crossman.

Crossman's eyes jerked toward him. "*You!*" he snapped. "I thought you'd be a thousand miles from here by now."

Jim shook his head. "I would have been, but I heard you were looking for me. Nice of you to meet me on my way back."

"You knew before you left that I was lookin' for you."

Jim shrugged. "Whether you believe me or not makes no difference. The important thing is why you wanted to see me."

There was deep, savage hatred in Crossman's dark eyes. But there was something else, too—the lingering remains of an old respect he had formerly held for Jim.

"I forgot," Crossman said, "just why I was lookin' for you. A month ago, I'd have killed you. Now I'm just tellin' you to play it quiet." He jerked a shoulder toward Brackeen. "My business is with this gentleman, not you."

It was an out for Jim—an open offer of neutrality that might have made many men pause to think it over. Jim didn't hesitate.

He just said, "I don't reckon, Crossman, that Brackeen cares much about doing business with skunks. I handle that department."



IT WAS like dropping a match in a powder train. Crossman cursed and his hand moved downward. Jim reached for his own gun. In that timeless instant, he saw several things happen simultaneously. Brackeen dove for the six-gun hanging over the wagon wheel. Sancho leaped forward, knife shining. Twist-Ear lifted his sixgun.

When his own gun cleared leather, Jim dove sideways and slammed a shot past Crossman. Twist-Ear doubled up, grasping his middle with a whispered moan. Crossman's gun roared and Jim felt a mule kick land on his left shoulder. Then his gun centered on Crossman.

The renegade caved, gasped once, and then lay very still. Complete silence descended. Jim couldn't understand it, couldn't understand why the three outlaws who were still standing were raising their hands skyward.

Then Ma Brackeen moved out into the light. The old muzzle-loader in her hands wavered back and forth. "Better not move, boys," she said.

Terry saw Jim holding his bleeding shoulder and hurried to him. Kneeling, she inspected the wound.

"I'll get some water and bandage," she said in a tight, strained voice. "I think the bullet went through clean."

Jim grinned faintly. "Sure. I'll be up and around tomorrow."

He was a few days off in his calculations. It was a week before he was able to navigate under his own power, but he couldn't remember when he'd enjoyed being shot so much.

The herd was in sight of Dodge when he

was again in the saddle. Terry rode anxiously along beside him to see that he didn't overdo himself.

Dave Brackeen pulled up beside them and said, "Well, there's the end of the trail."

Jim nodded soberly. Trail's end. The end of many things for him. He'd be leaving Brackeen here. The Texan would probably be settling down in Kansas.

Brackeen said, "What are your plans, Jim?"

Jim shrugged. "I'll just ride, I reckon."

"I could use a partner. Like to have you stay with me."

Jim shook his head. "Afraid farm life wouldn't suit me. I have to be where there's lots of elbow room. And, somehow, wherever I am trouble seems to pop up. So I better drift where I can deal with it in the only way I know. A Kansas farm wouldn't hold me, I'm afraid."

Brackeen snorted. "Who said anything about a Kansas farm? Hell, I'm headed back to Texas soon as I sell this herd and get some cash to rebuild with."

Jim took a deep, quick breath. "But I thought you were finished down there."

"Finished? I reckon not! I got ten thousand head of wild stuff running loose in the Brazos country. So wild no Comanche will ever run it off. It's goin' to take some hard ridin' an' maybe a bit of fightin' to start up again." He paused and stared south for a moment. His voice took on a kind, gruff tone. "I'd sure like to have you, son."

Jim didn't answer for a time. He looked at Terry. She met his eyes for an instant, then reined her horse about and rode off. Jim reckoned, though, from what he'd seen in her eyes just now, that she wouldn't ride so fast but what he could catch up with her, bad arm and all.

And he reckoned, too, as he grasped Dave Brackeen's hand, that maybe before long he'd ride for Texas.

Gold, Guts—and a Gallows!

By G. ARTHUR ALAN

THE Dutchman came awake with a cold feeling of dread. Some sound, alien to the night, heard above the howl of the blizzard, had jarred him from his slumber. There it came again: three

sharp blows on the door of his little cabin. . . .

From where he lay, the Dutchman cast a quick, furtive glance through the darkness, toward the glowing coals in the stone

Charley Harper, torturer, bandit and killer, led Idaho's vigilantes a merry chase that holiday weekend back in 1863. But they finally caught him and gave him a belated Christmas gift — a tight-drawn hangman's knot!



In October . . . Harper and his gang held up a pack train. . . .

fireplace. Under the hearthstones lay his life's earnings—more than five-thousand dollars in gold dust laboriously panned the previous summer from his claim down the canyon.

Outside, the wind screamed in its fury. Drifts would be piling deep in the canyon tonight, he thought. He wondered vaguely who would be out at such an hour in such a night.

The knock on the door was repeated, louder this time.

"Vot iss?" the Dutchman called from his bunk, raising his voice to be heard above the moan of the wind.

"Open up, Dutch. It's us," a man said gruffly. "We're lost in this damned storm. Open up, or we'll freeze!"

"Ja!" the Dutchman exclaimed. "Chust vun moment!"

He flung aside the blankets, found a splinter beside the fireplace, with which he lit the lamp, and carrying it with him, he took down the bar that secured the door and flung it wide. He was totally unprepared for what awaited him.

Five masked men jammed the portal, limned against the backdrop of falling snow. Before he could cry out they were upon him, bearing him back into the cabin. A man brushed the lamp from his hand, and in the brief irradiance before it crashed he saw a gun flashing savagely downward, felt the paralyzing smash of it against his skull. Then all was blackness. . . .

They found him the next day, his body bruised and mutilated, his feet burned to blackened crisps, his cabin a shambles, and the hearthstone torn up and the cache beneath ransacked. The gold was gone. It was apparent that torture had been resorted to in order to make the Dutchman reveal his secret.

They found something else, too. Upright in a knothole of the rough flooring of the shack, which held it fast, was the heel from a man's boot. It was the only clue. And in the nearby gold camp of Florence, Idaho,

that very day, a man by the name of Charley Harper had the local bootmaker affix a heel to one of his boots—and he paid the cobbler in gold.

Charley Harper was one of the toughest desperadoes who ever came into the Idaho gold region. When news that the yellow stuff had been discovered at the headwaters of the Salmon River in Idaho reached California in 1861, Harper gathered about himself five of the most prized cut-throats he could obtain and departed from the Mother Lode country for the new diggings.

In his band were two men named Bill Peoples and Dave English, both wanted for murder in San Francisco; an outlaw known in California as Happy Harry Scott; one Club Foot George Lane; and another notorious criminal known as Jim Brokie.

It is evident, from this motley assortment, that Charley Harper and his gang's mining operations in the Idaho diggings were to be "above ground," and not with a pick, shovel, and gold pan.

They headed for the then roaring boom camp of Florence, where they intended to make their headquarters, arriving there late in the summer. And in this connection there is a little anecdote that old-timers used to tell about how Harper and his gang first came to town—riding hell-for-leather down the street, shooting and yelling, and finally pulling up before a saloon, entering it, and ordering drinks for everyone there. At the flourish with which they displayed gold dust, an inquisitive bartender asked if they had struck gold.

"Made a strike? Hell no!" Harper is said to have snorted. "We just stuck up a pack train that was headin' for Salt Lake City and took what we wanted!"



DURING that fall and winter, countless men were robbed and murdered in and around Florence. Scarcely a night had passed except that the

next morning the body of a miner would be found dead upon the frozen ground, all his valuables missing, and his pockets turned inside out. And, openly, in saloons and on the street, Harper and his associates flaunted the stolen money; they even bragged of committing the crimes.

But the robbery and murder of the Dutchman was different. The very atrociousness of the crime alarmed even Florence, quite accustomed every morning to finding a dead man in its streets or alleys. For a man to die suddenly from gunshot is one thing, but to be beaten and tortured to death is quite another. The Dutchman had been well liked in Florence even though he lived alone and was considered somewhat eccentric. Feeling over his death was high, and Harper and his crew did not display their gold as freely after his murder as they had before.

The night following the Dutchman's death, a number of Florence's astute citizens met in a back room of a saloon, with the avowed intention of putting a stop to the numerous crimes that were being committed around the camp. It was the first vigilante meeting that was held in Idaho Territory.

Depredations, however, did not slacken. Although not as openly as before, miners were relieved of their gold dust, and many were shot down cold-bloodedly if they attempted to resist. But one youngster of sixteen, by a clever ruse, successfully avoided surrendering his dust to Harper and his band, thereby winning the grudging admiration of the outlaw for his courage.

The boy and three miners were held up in the mountains above Florence. The miners, when ordered to do so by the outlaws, quickly threw their pokes into a pile on the trail. But the boy hesitated. Charley Harper ordered him to do so at once.

But the boy was unafraid.

"You wouldn't rob a poor devil like me, would you?" he asked. "Is yore heart all gizzard?"

"Come on, younker," the outlaw rasped. "Shell out or I'll part yore brains with a .45 slug!"

"Wa-al, stranger," the boy drawled, "what do you take Salmon River dust at, anyhow?" And he drew an empty poke from his pocket, handing it to the outlaw. "If you think I've got any more," he said, "search me."

Pleased at the cool effrontery of the boy, Harper burst into laughter. Opening the boy's poke, he dropped two double eagles into it and tossed it back to him.

"Keep it, son," he said. "Buy the boys a drink when you get to town." And he and his companions rode away. Grinning, the boy slipped the poke back into his pocket and felt gingerly down the side of his leg, where two well-filled pokes hung suspended from his belt, concealed beneath his levis, each containing two thousand in gold.

In October of 1862, Harper and his gang held up a pack train belonging to Neil McKlinchy thirty miles out of Florence. Two weeks later a pack train owned by Joe and John Berry was held up only five miles from Lewiston, and was relieved of eleven thousand dollars. The Berrys recognized three of the outlaws in spite of the masks they wore—Dave English, Bill Peoples, and Happy Harry. As soon as the robbers had ridden away the packers returned to town and reported the robbery to the authorities, who were at last in a position to act.

The sheriff at Lewiston arrested English, Peoples, and Scott when they arrived there, and placed them in the unfinished jail building under heavy guard. Peoples made a confession, naming Club Foot George Lane and Jim Brokie as other members of the gang, naming Charley Harper as the leader.

A frantic search was made for the missing members of the band, but to no avail. Jim Brokie made good his get-away and was never heard of again. Club Foot George had mounted a fast horse and ridden swift-

ly out of town. Later he joined Henry Plummer's band of outlaws, and was hanged by the vigilantes in Bannock, Montana Territory, in 1864.

While this had been going on the vigilantes from Florence rode into Lewiston in a group. During the night shooting was heard down at the unfinished jail building, where the prisoners were being held. When the people of Lewiston gathered around the jail next morning they found the guards gone, the door smashed and, suspended from the rafters and swaying slightly in the breeze, the dead bodies of the three outlaws. Pinned to the shirt front of each was a placard:

VIGILANTES!

Meanwhile Charley Harper, who had not taken part in the robbery of the Berry train, had started for Lewiston to join his comrades there. While riding through the mountains he ran into an old trapper.

"Hear the news about the hangin's up to Lewiston?" the oldster chirped.

"Nary a thing," Harper drawled.

"Well," said the trapper, "Bill Peoples, Dave English, and Happy Harry were hung for robbery by the Vigilantes. Jim Brokie and Club Foot George got away. If they ever catch them two boys, they'll make it hot for 'em!"

"Is them two the only ones they're after?" inquired Harper.

"No-up. Charley Harper's the big chief they're after the most. But I guess he's already been hung. Feller rode into town the other day and said he saw him strung up out on the Camas Prairie!"

Harper waited to hear no more. He immediately turned his horse around and headed north. But he had cheated the rope too long, already. At Colville, on the Upper Columbia, the vigilantes caught up and hanged him on New Year's Day, 1863.

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GUN SONG

A book-length adventure epic

By TOM ROAN

Chapter I

THE DEAD RIDE

A WINCHESTER let go with its one jarring report from the cottonwoods along the eastern side of the river. The tall rider in dusty gray coming up

the old cattle trail had just time enough to fling himself clear of his star-faced bay as the horse stumbled to a halt. The man dropped over on his left side, while the



In the terrible heat, he reached the man and woman.

at FUNERAL RIVER

sounds of the rifle still rocketed back and forth from the high canyon walls at either hand.

Phil Gunsong kept going when he struck the ground. Another bullet whistled over-

head as he dropped in a gangling sprawl behind a cluster of chokeberry bushes and a sheltering rock. A glance had shown him that his old carbine had been caught under the horse as the animal fell. The

The power-mad Death Head brand warned strange riders not to linger on Funeral River range, but Phil Gunsong, nomad quick-shooter from the Border, joined the graybeard lawman of a town of condemned men in a cleanup campaign against Satan's own syndicate—knowing his only pay would be in gunfire, by raiders' torch and traitors' dynamite!



trail-scarred six-shooter at his right hip was not going to be much use against a hidden man with a rifle—especially against some cowardly Funeral River gunman who would hide in the trees and open fire on a man without even a smattering of warning.

But Funeral River was like that those hot August days. Gunsong had heard about it even before he had come up over the Montana-Wyoming line, three days before. Drought, ill tempers and sudden gun wars were the order of both the day and night in these mountain-walled rangelands of late. Men got killed—if all reports were true—just for the hell of it. Old friends and new were falling out with one another—cronies one day and gunning for one another's scalps the next. It was a good season for Boothill.

Droughts always brought war to Funeral River. Here was water, enough for all the cattle in Montana, but grasslands had to be crossed to reach it. Cattle would eat that grass, and grass meant life to the cattlemen along the river. Men fought for it and died for it, but Gunsong was not now thinking of the burned-out rangelands stretching away for eighty miles at either hand.

Down on his hands and knees, he crawled on through the rocks. Before he had gone fifty feet he heard another shot, a thundering *duh-bloom* that came out of the mid-day heat like the sudden sound of a drum. No bullet shrieked overhead or splattered itself among the rocks, and that one, heavy report had not come from a rifle. The sharp, penetrating crash of such a weapon was missing. That explosion had come from a Colt .45.

He dropped flat again, listening with his head cocked to one side. Not a sound came to him, and no sound did come until he was moving on again and had worked himself to a point seventy yards above the place where his horse had been shot from under him.

Now a fierce clatter of hoofs sounded in the distance. Old Colt in hand and ready for anything, he lifted his head and careened to one side so that he could look beyond a shoulder of rock. Through the trees and brush he caught a glimpse of a rider in the distance across the river, and his mouth sagged open with surprise.

The rider was mounted on a long-legged, sleek-looking pinto. The first glimpse showed that the rider was a slender girl in shiny black. Crouched over her saddlehorn, she was looking backward. When she faced forward again Gunsong saw curling yellow hair flashing in the sunlight. Then she was gone like something that had shot into view for only a second or two before it vanished in among the brush, rocks and trees up-canyon.

A horse snorted up the river a little later, and Gunsong again moved forward. That girl-running-away business would be a neat little way to entice a man into a trap. But he was not going to be fool enough for that. He eased on to the rock-walled bank of the river and slowly worked his way down over the jagged stones to the water's edge. The horse above him snorted again and started pawing the ground impatiently.



SHELTERED by overhanging rocks just above his head, Gunsong turned a sharp shoulder on the riverbank, and halted with his hat in one hand and his old Colt in the other. He could see the horse now. It was a tall, wall-eyed steel-gray brute standing tied to the roots of an old cottonwood, twenty rods away. On the animal's back was a silver-mounted Mexican saddle, and as Gunsong slipped closer he could see the brand on the right hip. It was big and ugly, the outlines of a skull and cross-bones that had been burned so deep and mercilessly it stood out as shining black welts in the horse's skin.

Now—still picking his way noiselessly—

Gunsong worked his way back to the rim of the high bank. The old cattle trail circled closer to the river here. Ahead, through the brush and trees, was a taller pile of blue-gray rocks, an ideal place for a gunman to hide, and before he had gone another sixty feet Gunsong crouched back, Colt ready as he caught the bright glint of metal ahead.

It was the silver-spurred heel of a black-booted left foot thrust out from between two rocks. The toe of the boot was turned upward. Gunsong studied it closely, to make certain that there was a foot inside that boot, and that it had not been placed there empty as a decoy. When he was certain there was a foot in it he went forward with a rush.

He halted with a surprised jerk when he reached the rocks. The owner of the boot was dead; he was lying on his broad back, with his face covered with blood from a big bullet hole almost squarely through the center of his dark forehead.

It was the body of a half-breed Mexican—a man of forty, splendidly dressed in the fine trappings of a Mexican *vaquero* who had had a small fortune to spend on his clothing. A great-brimmed sombrero was on the man's head and held in place with a broad strap under his chin. The silver-plated six-shooters at his hips were ivory-buffed and deeply engraved by some master craftsman. A lot of money—more than any common *vaquero* could afford—had been paid for those guns. Beyond the body, poked through a crack in the rocks so that its muzzle would look down the trail, was a high-powered rifle with two empty brass shells of exploded cartridges lying on the ground a yard away from it.

"So you're the killer who got my horse?" There was a strange note in Gunsong's voice as he spoke, standing there with his big hat still in his hand. "And then somebody plugged you!"

He turned and looked back across the river. It seemed impossible that that slender

slip of a girl on the pinto had killed such an out-and-out fighting man as the corpse appeared to have been. The blood on the man's face did not hide the piercing gleam that was still in the staring black eyes. The little black streaks of bloody mustaches on the man's curled upper lip seemed to be twisted to one side in a smile of contempt that would not leave his face even in death. His right hand was drawn back against the butt of one of his fine six-shooters. If the girl had done the shooting she had been lightning-fast with her shot.

Gunsong kept staring at the body and glancing across the river. He was about to turn back toward the dead man's horse when a fierce clatter of hoofs up the river caused him to look in that direction.

Two riders were galloping into view on spirited horses. Both were large, broad-shouldered and powerful, like the dead man. One was dressed in gray and heavily armed. His unruly hair and short-clipped beard looked as red as a burning bush, and he was mounted on a large, raw-boned sorrel with a long-flowing mane and tail that were like ruffling clouds of silver in the sunlight. When a star glittered on the man's vest, Gunsong knew—from what he had heard of the man—that that rider would be Sheriff Gossard McCalley, gunlord of Buckskin Bend, the town six or eight miles more up-canyon.

Gunsong saw all that at the first glance, and then gasped as if suddenly being robbed of his breath. As if looking at a ghost, he stood there staring at the red-headed man's companion.

The second rider was enough to make a man pop-eyed. He was identical to the dead man in size, looks and dress down to the smallest detail. He was a half-breed who rode an excellent steel-gray horse, a perfect mate to the one standing under the riverbank, and with the same ugly skull and cross-bones burned cruelly deep in the skin on the right hip. On the man's long and broad upper lip were those same ar-

rogant little "lizard-tail" mustaches, neatly shaved a full-inch apart and daintily waxed and twisted into shining streaks. As the rider's mouth curled open in a sudden laugh a gold-crowned eyetooth glinted at the right side of it.

Gunson looked quickly back at the body at his feet, and swore softly as he expelled his breath. In the set sneer of contempt between the parted lips a gold-crowned eyetooth glinted up at him from the right side of the dead man's mouth!

Chapter II

DEADLY ENEMY

CLAMPING on his hat and slipping his Colt back in its worn holster, Gunson moved quickly out into the trail. The two riders had immediately sawed back on their reins and slowed their horses to a walk. Both their eyes were on Gunson, as if his appearance at the side of the trail had suddenly filled them with tenseness.

"Howdy!" Gossard McCalley, a man of somewhere close to fifty, was the first to speak as the two pulled their horses to a halt with a little cloud of dust in the still air at their heels. "Sorter warm today." Then, before Gunson could answer, he had added: "Stranger in these parts, ain't yuh?"

"I was," Gunson nodded, "but somebody evidently didn't think so. I take it that you're the sheriff of Buckskin Bend. If you are, there's a dead man in the rocks behind me. He shot my horse out from under me, but it just so happens that I didn't kill him."

The sheriff slid out of his saddle without another question. He dropped his reins, pushed past Gunson, and forced his way through the brush to the rocks. The dark-skinned rider on the steel-gray had not yet said a word. He was leaning forward in his handsome saddle and fondling

a cigarette with one hand. A thin smile was on his face when he lighted the cigarette, but there was something keenly piercing in his dark-gold eyes as he continued to look at Gunson.

"Damn, that's bad!" The sheriff had not taken long. He came pushing his way back through the brush with his set lips grim and pale. "If yuh say yuh didn't do it, stranger," his eyes were like hawk eyes peering into Gunson's face, "then yuh might start right in an' tell us who did?"

Gunson told him only one lie about it, and for the moment he wondered why he told that. He did not say that he had seen the girl on the pinto.

"I heard a horse, that's all," he finished. "My gun hasn't been shot or cleaned for more than a week. Ten days, at least. Here, you can take a look at it, and then you'll find my carbine down the trail. It's lying there under my horse."

"Sometimes, especially in thees coun-tree," the dark-skinned man was speaking for the first time, "a man carries two seex-shooters, like myself and the sheriff, señor! One gun could be tossed into the river or the rocks after being used, hoh, no?"

"That's true," nodded the sheriff as he handed Gunson's old Colt back to him, "but first I think we'd better have a look at this fella's horse. Come with me, Jules. Yuh can have a look at the dead man later!"

It was as if another ghost had arisen as they turned a bend in the trail, with the sheriff leading his horse and the dark-skinned man riding beside them. Gunson's horse was up and just beginning to nibble at the grass at the side of the trail. Blood still dripped down the side of the animal's head.

"Horses," the sheriff half growled as he examined the animal, "sometimes get knocked cold with lead, like men. That's the way it was here, stranger. Bullet just creased his head. Looks like the barrel of yore carbine got bent when he fell. An' he

did fall. Dust on him and the saddle shows that, an'," he glanced on down the trail, "there's the place where he fell, leavin' the print of his whole side in the sand. So far, I don't catch yuh in a lie, fella.

"An' yuh, Jules!" He turned and looked at the half-breed lolling forward like a half-sleepy crow in his saddle. "I think yuh had better sorter drift on back to the Bend by yoreself. I'll look things over here. We'll put a lump of cold mud on this horse's head, an' he'll soon be in shape to ride again."

"But why should I go back, Señor McCalley?" The half-breed slowly straightened in his saddle and sent a suspicious glance toward the place where the dead man was lying. "I like your companee! I—Look, señor." He leaned forward suddenly, eyes as sharp and cruel as needles as they peered into the sheriff's face. "Ees there sometheeng I, Jules Mesita, should not see? Hoh, no? Hoh, no?"

"Don't let the hot-blooded side of yuh overflow yuh, Jules!" The sheriff held up his left hand, and Gunsong noted out of the corner of his eye that the man's right hand was hovering close to the butt of one of his big six-shooters. "There's been a killin' here, just as this fella says. He might have done that killin', but so far it don't look like it to me, an' I'm purty good at riddles."

Jules Mesita did not answer him. He was like a maniac throwing a sudden fit. With a fierce gouging of his needle-pointed rowels and a violent twist of the reins on his cruel, spade-mouthed Spanish bits that made his horse bawl with pain, he wheeled the steel-gray to go galloping back to the rocks.

"Take it easy." McCalley laid his hand on Gunsong's arm. "I want no gun-play. Remember that, now! As yuh might have already guessed, that dead man in the rocks ain't nobody but Jules Mesita's brother. Name was Juan, his twin. The only way I've ever been able to tell 'em apart is by

a scar on Juan's chin that's all covered up with blood right now. As a matter of keepin' down trouble I'm sorter puttin' yuh under an arrest. Don't let it jar yuh, 'cause I don't see no lie in them straight-lookin' blue eyes yo've got. Hold yoreself an' let me do the talkin' now!"

Spurring and quirting his horse, and jerking him from side to side with vicious twists of his reins, Jules Mesita was coming back out of the rocks as if Satan, himself, was right behind him. His face had become a blood-drained snarl of pain and rage. The dark-gold eyes were two mean, mad-killer streaks.



"FOR thees I weel keel!" he cried with the accent he had had a short time before becoming almost a wildly pitching scream. "Keel! Keel! Keel!"

"Don't look at me when you say that!" Gunsong had stepped quickly to one side of the sheriff. "When a man talks that talk to me I don't like it, Mesita!"

"Hold! Hold!" stormed the sheriff. "There'll be no gun-play here, Jules! *No gun-play, I tell yuh!*"

But Gunsong had already seen what Jules Mesita was going to do. Mesita wanted to see blood run. The man had brought his horse down from his rearing plunge and snatched him to a stiff-legged halt. With wide-open eyes that glittered now like those of a lynx at bay, and a beastly snarl on his face, Jules Mesita's right hand swung backward and downward to the butt of one of the engraved Colts at his hips.

"I weel keel!" he hissed. "*Keel!*"

The old Colt that had swept into Gunsong's right hand roared like a voice of doom as its lightning blade of fire leaped through the sunshine. A howl of pain and sudden terror came from the half-breed. His hand jerked upward as if the butt of

his Colt had become a blazing torch. A bullet had slapped through his holster and splintered itself to a thousand slivers against the man's six-shooter. Some of the splattering lead had caught Jules Mesita in the hand. He stared with awe, now, at a dozen drops of blood on the back of it as the sheriff spoke again in the voice of a man trying patiently to quiet startled horses.

"Hold, hold," he half-whispered. "Yuh asked 'im for it, Jules. Yes, yuh did! Yuh wanted it—even made 'im do what he did. I'm as surprised as yuh are. I didn't think I'd ever see the man who'd beat yuh on the draw. Had it been Juan, it would have been some difference, but—but hold, now, hold. This don't need to go no further."

"If it does," put in Gunsong calmly, watching Jules Mesita through narrow slits of blue-steel eyes, "I'll drive the next bullet straight through the bridge of his damned nose."

"Clear out, Jules. Clear, now," the sheriff was going on in that low monotone. "I'll take care of Juan's body an' bring it in on his horse. Tell Doc Wright, when yuh get to town, to be sorter lookin' for me. I aim to investigate this fella more. There ain't no need of trouble. Not a bit."

"We weel see about that, Señor McCally!" Mesita's gold-crowned tooth glinted like the blinking of an evil eye as he slowly backed his horse away. "And as for you, señor," his eyes again became the eyes of a lynx at bay as he looked at Gunsong, "you weel not forget, hoh, no? *Espero que le volveré á ver á V. pronto.*"

"What'd he say?" The sheriff frowned, expelling a sigh of relief as the man whirled his horse, steeled him, and set out at a furious pace back up the trail toward Buckskin Bend. "I never was worth a damn at slingin' or catchin' Spanish!"

"He said," Gunsong shrugged, "he hoped to see me again soon. Who is he and what is he?"

"A rich, powerful killer!" the lawman

said. "The most deadly man in Montana, who won't draw an easy breath until he gets even with yuh. I never believed there was a man livin' who could beat him on the gun-throw until yuh did it just now. Juan's death must have slowed 'im down. Yes," he added after a second's thought, "I'm shore it did. Jules just wasn't 'imself today. God help yuh if yuh look over the barrel of a gun with 'im if he's feelin' right."

Chapter III

TWINS

GUNSONG took care of his star-faced bay at once. Leading the horse down through a break in the bank to the river, he washed the animal's wound and stopped the blood while the sheriff squatted on his heels on the bank above to watch him. The skin on the head had been broken by a bullet that had caught the bay between the ears. It was like a nick, no wider than the bullet itself, and no more than an inch long.

"I've got a bottle of iodine on my saddle," the sheriff volunteered. "Have it if yuh want it."

"Don't want to kill 'im," Gunsong retorted. "Gunshot wounds and iodine don't go together. Not on a horse, at least. No horse doctor would probably agree with me, but I've seen too many of them get lockjaw instead of a cure."

"Yuh a horse doctor yorself?"

"Sure!" Gunsong grinned. "Up the hard way but the true way. There's not a thing I don't know about a horse!"

"Nope, I guess not," McCalley grunted, squatting there and staring across the river, as if he had suddenly forgotten the horse. It was several minutes before he spoke again. Then: "Yo're shore yuh didn't see anybody after Juan was killed? Think about it real hard now."

"Sure I'm sure!" Gunsong lied. "Who

would you think I might have seen, sheriff?"

"Nobody." The sheriff expelled a deep breath that sounded like a sigh of relief. "Just wanted yuh to be shore—an', yuh might say, to keep right on bein' shore. Juan Mesita was a bad un. Yes," he scowled, "a damn bad fella! Never was able to pin a thing on 'im, but ever'body knows. Know why he tried to kill yuh? No, I guess yuh don't. Yuh look enough like a fella called Bronc Sparkland to be his brother. Bronc's a deputy U. S. marshal we've been expectin' to revisit these parts. I even thought yuh was Bronc when I first saw yuh standin' there by the trail. No relation, I reckon?"

"None—and never heard of him!" Gunsong answered as he finished with the bay's wound and led the horse back up through the break in the rocks. "What do we do now?"

"Best thing I could do," frowned the sheriff, looking across the river again, "would be to tell yuh to burn saddle leather south, but I guess I'll have to take yuh on to the Bend to make things look natural. Are yuh *plumb shore*—an' ready to swear it—that yuh didn't see *anybody* ridin' away after Juan was shot?"

Gunsong helped him pile Juan Mesita's body on the high-strung steel-gray without answering. They roped the body in place with the man's lariat, and then rode on up the canyon with the steel-gray prancing and snorting behind them. In an hour they were within sight of Buckskin Bend.

From the distance the town was like a rock-ribbed fort perched on a high, flat-topped rise in the center of the canyon. The flat was rim-rocked. A few trees showed among the houses on top of it, and a steep trail wound its way up to the lower end of the crooked street, where a blacksmith's anvil was ringing in a smoke-blackened little shop to the right. Public stables were across the street, and Gunsong recognized Jules Mesita's horse stand-

ing at the hitchrack in front of a huge, two-story saloon and hotel to his left.

"I ain't exactly lockin' yuh up, Gunsong." The sheriff spoke from the side of his mouth as they clattered up the street toward the old stone jail at the head of it, after stopping at a doctor's office to leave the steel-gray and Juan Mesita's body in charge of the little bald-headed man. "I'll ask yuh just to hang around in the jail until I can sorter straighten things out a bit. I kind of like yuh—a little."

Gunsong did not answer him. He was looking at a horse standing at the hitchrack in front of the jail's narrow porch. The horse was a long-legged, sleek-looking pinto. At the first glance he was certain that he had recognized it as the one he had seen the girl in black riding. As they dismounted beside the horse he could have sworn that the girl herself appeared, hatless now, yellow hair shining—a girl pretty enough to make a man stare.

"That's my niece," the sheriff explained, with a wave of a big hand. "My sister's daughter. Name's Grace Riddell. Grace, this is Phil Gunsong, he says."



"I'M GLAD to know you," bowed the girl as Gunsong mounted the three steps to the porch. "Are you a marshal?"

"Not yet, Miss Riddell!" Gunsong smiled as he took off his hat, and the girl turned to lead the way on into the long, narrow office of the jail. "It seems at the moment I'm only a common prisoner of your uncle."

"Temporary," McCalley growled. "Just temporary. Juan Mesita's dead, Grace. That was him I just brought in on the horse. Got shot down the canyon."

"Shot?" The girl turned as she reached the big desk in the northeast corner of the room. "By this man, Uncle Goss?"

"Says he didn't," the sheriff answered

as he took off his big hat and headed for the old green water cooler on a shelf against the wall. In a short, clipped voice he told the story Gunsong had given him. "I'm inclined to believe this fella, Grace."

"And—and you didn't see *anybody*!" the girl exclaimed. "Just heard a rider galloping away?"

"That's all, Miss Riddell." Gunsong looked straight into her wide blue eyes. "I've told the sheriff I would be willing to swear it—if," his eyes narrowed, "I have to swear it."

"That's good!" Grace Riddell relaxed backward into the big, old, black leather swivel-chair behind the desk and seemed to expel a deep breath of relief. "I would hate to see anybody in trouble for shooting a rattleless rattlesnake like Juan Mesita—the dirty, black mad dog!"

"Don't talk like that, Grace!" McCalley snapped. "It ain't right for even a man to say such things! Damn it, gal, you know better. Been better raised! The dead is the dead!"

"And a snake is a snake!" Grace clipped, with sudden fire. "Rattlesnake, gopher or plain old bull! If it's dead it's only a dead snake—and you can't make anything else out of it, Uncle Goss!"

"She's goin' to be yore jailer, Gunsong!"

"I think," smiled Gunsong, "I'm going to like that very much, Sheriff McCalley."

"Which," nodded the sheriff, taking another glass of water, "is just the hell of it—on the tax-payin' people who have to foot the bills around here. Ever'time I lock up some son-of-a-gun he doesn't want to leave. I had one dude here who swore an' bedamned old Judge Bill Bull for a wild hawg right in his teeth because Bull said I didn't have no case again' 'im. We had to tie up the sucker an' send 'im out on the cross-country stage like a package of limburger cheese yuh can no longer live in the same house with. I hope Bill Bull don't get the fool notion of wantin' to

hang yuh. That Bill Bull is tough."

Gunsong laughed, but he was interested in something else at the moment as he turned, looked, then stared out a big window. A rider had just come out of a narrow alleyway down the street. It was a girl in shiny black, with curling yellow hair, and mounted on a long-legged pinto that was a positive mate for the one outside at the hitchrack.

"Evidently," Gunsong spoke so quickly he was not even thinking of what he was about to say, "you have a lot of twins around here?"

"Shore, shore," nodded the sheriff, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he looked out the window and down the street. "Buckskin Bend's purty near chuck-full an' runnin' over with 'em. Some say it's the water we drink from Funeral River."

Chapter IV

THE GUN-WARMING

"HANG yore gun an' belt on the wall," McCalley ordered. "Yuh can go on upstairs with the rest of the boys until I see Judge Bull. It won't take long, an' I've got an old Crow Indian out back who'll take care of yore horse an' put him in the corral behind the stables. He'll be safer there. I still say yuh ain't exactly under arrest."

The girl opened the latticed steel door to a narrow hall. It struck him as odd that the sheriff did not offer to search him after he had hung up his old belt and six-shooter on a peg alongside of which were a score of other belts and six-shooters. He saw a flight of steel stairs ahead of him, with half-open cell doors beyond them. Brighter light showed at the head of the stairs, and when he was half way up them a wild explosion of laughter sounded ahead of him.

At the head of the stairs was one huge room, with a large table in the center of

it, where a dozen men were playing cards. Another man was busy at a stove in the corner to the left, and three others sat by themselves at one of the front windows, as if shunning the company of the rest.

"Welcome to McCalley's Utopia!" boomed a short, heavy-set man with a sandy-gray mustache and a goatee. "Double welcome if yuh ain't wearin' the Death Head Mesita brand!"

Gunsong saw one of the three men in the corner shrug as he glanced with a contemptuous little sneer at his two companions. The smell of coffee and frying beefsteak filled the room. Nothing else mattered for the moment to a man who now realized that he was as hungry as a half starved wolf.

"I wear nobody's brand, yet," he told the men at the table as a bench was pushed forward for him at the head of it. "Being held, I'm told, just temporarily—for investigation, you might say."

"That's good!" nodded a tall, sharp-faced old cowboy. "Some of us are waitin' to be hanged. I'll start with the cook first, a cook in a place like this bein' the important man. That's Slim Albright. Walkin' Cross man. Object of detainment: murder. The dude with the billygoat whiskers is Pat Rainey, owner of the Walkin' Cross, an' that's Dude Clark. Next is Tom Pender, then Mitch Blanton, George Likely, an' Hans Larsen. All Walkin' Crossers. Object of detainment: ditto the cook. Next comes the Circle Star monkeys: Sam Taylor, Tubbs McWhorter, Lige Sutton, Boots Lane, an' Olaf Nelson. Object of detainment: murder, hoss-stealin', arsonry. Most all done convicted or goin' to be.

"I'm Hood Johnson, cow-boss of the Windmill spread, ten miles north of town. Crime an' reason for limited pediment not yet fully explained. An' now we come to what we call the trashy crowd." He turned half-around on his bench and glowered at the three sullen men at the window. "The

fat one who looks like a black skunk with a mustache is Pride Fallon. Next, who looks like a snake with a hat on, is Rube Rye. The little jimple-jawed squirt, who looks like the rat what stole the cheese, is Windy Trigg. All Death Head, all murder. No conviction likely or expected. An' now—" the man swung back on his bench—"who're yuh—an' what's new in the great, wide-open spaces outside?"



GUNSONG told them. They had been too busy with the three poker games going on on the table to notice the sheriff ride into town. It was a rush for the windows looking down the street when Gunsong told them Juan Mesita was dead, and then the great room of the jail was filled with the wild howling and yelling of an Apache war-dance, while the three Death Head riders scurried away to the safety of the cells downstairs.

"Best news I've heard since Pa shot his first hoss-thief!" gasped Johnson, throwing himself back on his bench with perspiration streaming down his face. "No wonder them three monkeys run back downstairs, though we've sworn to a truce with Miss Riddell to lay nary a hand on 'em."

Gunsong was given a steak, potatoes and coffee, an abundant meal for a hungry man. A man could like the cook and the men at the table at once. They were ordinary cow country men, but the three gents who had dashed downstairs had been something else. Their looks had been poison. Every move had been one of distrust and hatred for the men behind them. Even without belts and six-shooters, the brand of the gunmen had been there in the glint of the eyes and the jerky tightening of the lips as they talked to one another in low voices.

"The Mesitas," the sheriff had explained on the way into Buckskin Bend, "have just about run things of late to suit themselves.

Times are bad, an' quarrels come easy when the weather burns yuh out an' leaves yore cattle starvin' on the range. Yuh have to turn yore best friend down when he comes beggin' for a little strip of yore range for his cattle to feed on. Friend or no friend, yuh can't starve yore own cattle to death.

"Then, three years ago, the Mesita brothers come. They'd been here before to see Frank Mesita, my sister's second husband. Hoss killed her first, an' by him she had had two girls an' two boys. People realized there was some secret between the Mesitas an' Frank, but nobody knew what it was—not until after Frank was picked up, shot through the back, one morning on the south side of his Fiddle An' Bow, afterwards changed to the Death Head brand yuh see on that horse and the one Jules was ridin'. Mexican stuff.

"A month after Frank was killed the Mesitas move in, callin' themselves his sons by a former marriage, an' bringin' papers to show Frank had never got a divorce from a girl he'd married in Texas an' atterwards deserted, with the two boys, in Mexico.

"That made his marriage to my sister not worth a toot, so the court held. Lock, stock an' barrel, my sister Mary an' her kids was moved off the ranch, an' Jules an' Juan took over. Mary, yuh see, didn't have no kids by Frank. Was only married to him ten years or so. Frank did look somethin' like Jules an' Juan, only he was fair-faced, gray-eyed and had light hair. True Spanish, he said, an' the real Spanish are light. When they mixed up with other breeds it's somethin' else.

"The Mesitas have raised more hell than Carter was supposed to have oats. Fired the old Fiddle an' Bow crowd. Brought in their own crew from Mexico an' the Border. Frank was rich. Come here with scads of money, an' Mary had only her kids an' a hard road to travel to bring them up. Frank was as good to them as

a real daddy. Better, in fact, than Tom Riddell was. Tom was a gambler, a whiskey-drinker an' a pistol shooter. Yuh know the kind. Either always in trouble, always in the jailhouse or just gettin' out. Which is a cuss laid on most people named Tom, I guess. Don't be surprised if yuh see Buckskin Bend boilin' full of Death Headers when we get there."

Those men were galloping in by the time Gunsong finished his third cup of coffee. Even the crash of hoofs on the hard-packed street sounded war-like. They swirled in from the west, and some came from the east. A motley crowd; each man was armed, and each carried either a carbine or a rifle on his saddle. Mexicans and whites, they were, hard men, stiff-drinkers, and thoroughly schooled fighting men.

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"**H**EADIN' for the Death Head Saloon," Hood Johnson growled, looking out a window. "The Mesita crowd has even its own drinkin' place. There'll be trouble soon."

"War, yuh mean," Pat Rainey put in quietly. "Look who's just ridin' in."

It was another mixed gang, this time from the north. In the party of ten there were Walking Cross and Windmill riders. They swung in around the corner of the jail, and yelled up greetings to the men inside. Then they were gone on down the street, to pull up at a hitchrack to their left in front of the Funeral River Bar. They dismounted, slapped the dust from their big hats on their chapped legs, and moved on inside, each man casting a mean glance across the street.

Five minutes later Mesita men were stringing out of the Death Head. They walked straight to the hitchrack and started leading horses away through an alley to the rear of the saloon. Soon that hitchrack was empty, and a man stood there directing other Death Head riders,

who were stringing in to take their horses behind the saloon. Right after that the men from the north were clearing the hitchrack in front of the Funeral River Bar.

Now Gossard McCalley appeared on his raw-boned sorrel. The man dropped his reins at the hitchrack in front of the Death Head. Hitching up his belts, he went inside. Ten minutes later he came out of the Death Head, and led his horse across the street. Again he dropped his reins, hitched up his belts, and walked into the Funeral River. Five minutes later he came out, mounted his horse and galloped on up the street to the corrals and stables behind the jail. When Gunsong saw him again he was walking down the street with a double-barreled shotgun.

"An' that's that," Johnson nodded. "Goss has laid down the law. He's mean when he starts. *Look!* Somebody's already warmin' his gun!"

A shot had thundered down the street from the flat roof of an old saddle store on the west side of it. Gossard McCalley stopped in the middle of the street. The shotgun slipped and slid off his arm. He turned half around, staggered, and fell to his hands and knees in the dust just as a scream came from the jail office.



LEAVING the others standing there, staring through the window at the sheriff, Gunsong turned and literally flew back downstairs. As he reached the foot of the steps he stumbled to a halt as an oath was snarled at him like a slap in the face. The door to the corridor was open. Beyond it Grace Riddell lay on the floor with a thin stream of blood oozing from the right side of her mouth.

Two burly men had entered the office of the jail, darting in—Gunsong was to learn later—through an end window just as the sheriff was shot down. A blow to the girl's jaw had put her down just as she

had screamed, and the big keys had been snatched up from the desk to free the three Death Head men.

"Stand back!" snarled a tall, dark-faced man, nervously covering Gunsong with a long-barreled, blue-steel six-shooter. "Just a little free-handed jail delivery goin' on!"

Pride Fallon, Rube Rye and Windy Trigg had already gone out the door and were snatching down their belts and six-shooters from the pegs in the wall. The man facing Gunsong now gave the door a slam and turned the key in the lock, and the five men whirled, leaving the room through the east window.

A gun thundered behind the jail a few moments later, and it looked like a clean-cut get-away. But the man who had locked the door had made one mistake that was soon to prove fatal. In his hurry he had left the keys hanging there in the door, and the latticed steel was just wide enough for Gunsong to work his hand through an opening and reach the key in the lock.

The girl was getting up in a daze as he shoved open the door. He closed the door, locked it, and tossed the keys on the floor at her feet, then leaped to the gunlocker on the wall to seize a Winchester. A few more leaps took him to the window, and he was outside and keeping close to the wall as he ran to the rear of the jail.

Horses for the three Death Head prisoners had already been caught and saddles were being thrown on them. The old Indian McCalley had mentioned was lying there on the ground with a pool of blood gathering around him while the two men who had freed the prisoners were mounted on spirited horses and were standing guard.

The man who had left the keys in the door was the first to see Gunsong. He yelled, right hand sawing backward to the butt of a Colt, just as Gunsong whipped up the rifle and pulled the trigger. It was the last yell the man ever made. Shot through the forehead, he reeled to one side and fell.

"Get 'em up!" Gunsong bawled. "*Everybody!*"

The second man on a horse was already clawing for a six-shooter with his left hand. Gunsong caught him with a bullet that tore through him heart-high to bring him pitching headfirst to the ground as his horse snorted to one side.

"Don't kill us!"

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WINDY TRIGG was the first of the three escaping men to throw up his hands. Rube Rye hesitated, then lifted his hands as he saw Pride Fallon's hands go up with a series of short jerks.

"Yo've got us—I guess!" Fallon snarled. "Quick work, I'd say, but it won't do yuh no good in the end, smart fella! Yo'll shore as hell pay for this! Yo'll pay, shore as hell!"

"Maybe not!" Gunsong snapped. "One at a time start unbuckling your belts and let them drop!"

Men in jail upstairs cheered him as they saw what was going on through the rear windows. Hurriedly now he marched his prisoners back around the jail and inside, with Grace Riddell standing there holding the corridor door open for him. When he shoved the men on inside it was like turning them into a den of wildcats as the other prisoners—knowing now what had happened to the girl—fell upon them with kicks and cuffs that filled the jail with yells and oaths.

Gossard McCalley was not in the street when Gunsong turned and rushed to a window. The sheriff had arisen, and had sought shelter to his left in a staggering run. Now, with his big hat lying in the street behind him, he had the advantage of a watchmaker's doorway and was suddenly blazing a charge of buckshot across the street at a man trying to leave the roof of the saddle store. A yell answered his

shot, and Gunsong saw a man on a ladder reel backward to go crashing down out of sight.

Both the Mesita men in the Death Head Saloon and the crowd in the Funeral River Bar were taking a hand in it by this time. Roaring gunfire swept the closed front door and windows of the Funeral River with a hail of lead, and right back, answering it in the same ringing burst, the Funeral River opened up.

"Stop it! Stop it!" the sheriff bellowed. "Hold yore fire!"

Gunsong saw him rise and go forward in a staggering, half-dizzy gait. It looked like certain suicide. There was blood on his right shoulder, but it seemed no brighter than the hair on his bare head. He was headed for the middle of the street, going to place himself in a direct line of fire between the two saloons.

"Look!" The girl caught Gunsong's arm. "All the way down there by the corner of the blacksmith shop! That man with a rifle! He's going to drop Uncle Goss!"

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IT WAS certainly in the half-hidden killer's mind. He was a short, black-bearded gunman with an old gray hat pulled low on his forehead. Gunsong saw him swinging up his rifle. He jerked his own rifle up, taking quick aim as he squeezed the trigger. As the rifle crashed out its report the half-hidden man jerked forward like a drunkard spinning on one heel. His rifle flew out of his hands. A puff of wind carried his hat away as he went down on his back, tried to get up, and rolled over on his face in the dust.

"Hold! Hold!" The sheriff's voice rolled over the town like the booming of a drum. "Hold, hold, I say!"

Gossard McCalley had reached the street directly between the two saloons. The shotgun was back in the crook of his

arm. He looked like a bare-headed saint standing there, with the sunlight appearing to blaze in a halo around his head. His right hand was lifted as if trying to hold back lightning from the sky.

"Enough's enough, boys!" Again McCalley's voice rolled and reverberated up and down the town. "Ain't nobody in either crowd got a speck of plain sense?"

The shooting had come to an end. A great hush had settled. Even the men in the jail had ceased pounding and kicking the Death Head gunmen about. They were up there staring out the windows, men holding their breaths at the sight down the street.

Gossard McCalley was going forward. His back was to the Funeral River Bar now. Had he an enemy in that crowd it was the enemy's chance of a lifetime to down his man. He could have been shot as he walked straight on to the Death Head Saloon, but he was like some kind of a god who has cast a spell over the town. The doors were closed ahead of him. He reached them, put up his hand, and thrust them open.

"Grand! Grand!" A great sob of relief came from Grace Riddell as the man disappeared into the saloon. "What a man among men!"

"He's more than a man," nodded Gunsong, with his lips trembling and his own face bloodless from the tension. "Sheriff Gossard McCalley's either a god or a devil, and if my opinion's asked I'd say he was half of one and half the other!"

Chapter V

"CALF ROPE"

HE WAS not gone long. He came out of the saloon with Jules Mesita right in front of him and the muzzle of a six-shooter rammed against his spine. Mesita was walking with his hands up and trying to glare back over his shoul-

der. Death Head riders started to swarm out behind them, but Gossard McCalley said something to them over the point of his shoulder, and the men crowded back inside the saloon and slammed the heavy front doors.

It was like a funeral march, coming up the street. Blood still oozed from McCalley's shoulder, where the bullet from the roof had nicked him to knock him down. But it was no wound for such a man, and, grim-lipped, he was walking as straight as a gunbarrel. When they came to where the sheriff's hat was lying he made Mesita pick it up for him. Then they came on, straight to the jail, with Mesita's handsome six-shooters still at his hips. At the edge of the porch McCalley took them away from him and tossed them on the ground.

"Now, right on up the steps," the sheriff ordered, "an' right on in, Jules. I'm a man of my word. Yore men leave town. I'm damned if they don't, an' I'm bull-headed as hell about it. They leave quick or I'm lockin' yuh up, an' that won't be nice for yuh."

"Lock 'im up!" howled Hood Johnson as the prisoners now swarmed down to the door to start shaking it and hammering on the walls like imps in a cage. "Turn little Daniel in on the lions, an' this time we'll see whether the lions keep their mouths locked or not!"

"Let me go, McCalley!" Jules Mesita balked at the front door as if he was really about to be pushed into a den of lions. "My men weel—weel go. *Sí! Sí!* Let me call down to, them, señor."

"Call!" the sheriff ordered, allowing him to take a step backward on the porch and turn to face down the street. "Don't hold no palaverin' in Spanish to the Mex in yore crowd. I won't stand for it."

Gunsong saw Mesita open his mouth to shout, but the man closed it, and a wide, evil grin spread its way across his face. He had seen a big man hurrying up the

street, a rolling, fat, red-faced man dressed like a newly-elected congressman returning from his first Washington trip to greet his country cousins. The man was in a devil of a hurry, lifting his hand and waving it. When he was close enough, he was all out of breath and started gasping angrily.

"You can't do this, Goss! I'm the court! You've got to stop right here and listen to me! I order you to release that man immediately! I won't stand for your bullying!"

"Yo're the judge, all right, Bull." The sheriff's voice was the mean growl of a bulldog ready to fight over his bone. "Yuh act like it. Bull's yore name, yuh beller like a bull an' yuh act like a damned bull. Yo're a gawd a'mighty in yore own right, just like all the rest of yore kind, but—"

"I order Mesita released!" gasped the judge as he mounted the steps, with perspiration streaming down his face. "I'll have you locked up in your own infernal jail for this, Goss."

"Turn the pot-gutted buzzard in here with us!" Hood Johnson yelled. "Let us have our hands on 'im! He won't ever set on his bench agin when we get through! Turn 'im on in, Goss! Let us hand-talk an' boot-talk to 'im."

"Just what I was thinkin'," the sheriff nodded. "Come right on in an' set yore hawg lard down with the boys inside, Bull. Like yore breed, yuh don't mind orderin' others locked up, an' it might do yuh a heap of good."

"This won't do!" the judge cried, beginning to back down the steps. "Damn it, man, I'll—I'll—"

"What?" Gunsong could not help it. He had gone forward with the rifle. Stepping out on the porch to the surprise of the sheriff, he shoved the muzzle of the weapon against the judge's enormous belly. "Right on in as the sheriff says!"

"Wait!" Mesita snarled. "I'll take care of thees wan in time. Go home, men!" His

voice rolled down the street. "Home!"

"That's good," McCalley grinned. "I'll just hold yuh a spell to make shore they do get outa town. What're yuh doin' outa jail, Phil Gunsong? Didn't I lock yuh up?"

"I came out," Gunsong explained, "when three of Mr. Mesita's men were coming out with the aid of two others who overpowered Miss Riddell. I think she can tell you something about it. Two of Mr. Mesita's men are dead in the corral out back, and with them is your old Indian they shot down."

It was the first Gossard McCalley knew about it, because there had been too much noise down the street for him to hear anything else. The girl told him her part of it, with Mesita and the judge staring at her. Then they all walked around behind the jail while Mesita's men were mounting their horses in the rear of the Death Head Saloon and were hurriedly streaking it out of town.

"Those belts and guns," Gunsong pointed to the first pile, "belong to Pride Fallon. Those are Windy Trigg's, and those are Rube Rye's."

"I didn't shoot nobody!" Trigg cried, looking through the bars of a rear cell window. "Yuh can smell my guns an' see that they ain't been shot since I was locked up a week ago!"

"Yo're scared, I reckon!" Pride Fallon's voice boomed like a slamming door inside the jail, and there was the sound of a blow and a yelp of pain from Trigg. "Well, I ain't, McCalley. I shot old Flyin' Crow in self-defense when he tried to stop us from takin' horses out of the stables, an' I'll bet Judge Bill Bull bears me out at the trial."

"He would, Pride," nodded the sheriff. "Bill Bull's mighty good when it comes to takin' care of Death Head men. Yuh fellas shorely ought to appreciate it."

"Lock this man up for murder!" Judge Bill Bull turned and pointed to Gunsong.

"Right now, Goss!" The judge was shaking all over.



"**A** FRAID I can't do it," the sheriff smiled. "He's my deputy I've just appointed. While you're here, an' right handy, I'll ask yuh to swear 'im in for me. Then I'll let yuh an' Jules go back down the street, now that the Mesita crowd's pulled outa town."

"Come on, Jules!" snarled the judge, with perspiration still streaming like rain down his face, and the face itself looking as if every blood vessel in it was about to burst. "Let's get out of this. This damned fool has gone crazy as hell again—a madman, positively mad and nothing short of it!"

"I get that way," the sheriff's eyes narrowed, "when yuh monkey with me too long, Bill Bull. An' yuh remember this, smart fella." He turned, eyes like bullets as they peered into Mesita's face. "There's only one Mesita left. That's yuh. When yuh go, there won't be no more Mesitas. Do yuh get the point?"

"When I go," the man sneered, "there weel be no Señor McCalley left to smile about it behind hees hand."

"All right, shake along." The sheriff stepped to one side. "Yuh know where I dropped yore fancy guns out front. I hope the dogs don't bite yuh as yuh go down the street."

"Wait!" hissed Mesita, accent sharpening. "I weel not be what you call heem ze target for zee men in zee Funeral Reeve Bar to shoot at. I weel not walk back down zee street alone!"

"Well, I'll swear!" The sheriff was popped now. "First time I ever heard a Mesita yellin' calf rope! Phil, yuh go in the office an' get that fine pair of guns an' belts in the right hand lower drawer of my desk. Get yoreself a deputy's badge out of the middle drawer. I've told the boys in the Funeral somethin' about yuh.

Kindly escort Mr. Mesita back to the Death Head, an' I'm shore there won't be no shootin'. Never is, anyhow, unless the Death Head buzzards start it. Git going."

It was the personification of humiliation for Jules Mesita. With his men sent out of town and no-one left to back his play, there was not a thing he could do about it. He was "eating crow" for the first time since he had come to Buckskin Bend. Never in his life had it galled him as much as this. If he started anything here there would be that crowd in the Funeral River Bar to reckon with. Any excuse would be enough for them to down him in a sudden blast of gunfire—and Jules Mesita did not want to die just yet.

He was scared, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that Judge Bill Bull was scared also. The blood had left Bull's face as they walked down the street, with Gunsong keeping to the left of them as a shield, and the new star of authority glittering on his vest. Bill Bull actually looked as if he was ready to drop dead. His unusually large lower lip was like a bag dropped forward. He was trying to keep his dignity, but he could not keep his eyes away from the now open front door and windows of the Funeral River Bar where quick death lurked.

It was a burning brand thrust to already scalded flesh when a sudden roar of laughter came pouring out the windows and over the bright-red swinging screen doors of the Funeral River. Jules Mesita's heart skipped a beat, staggered, and then drummed violently in his big chest. It was like the pain of a bullet for a few seconds. His lips paled, quivered, then warped into a sneer.

"Zee dogs," he breathed out the words tensely, "weel growl, eh, no, Judge Bull? *Estoy muy encolerizado*. But," he shrugged, firing a wicked glance across the street "for them—*el rayo ha caido! Si, si,*" he repeated, half in English and half in Span-

ish, "I am very angry, and for them the thunderbolt has fallen."

"Keep your mouth shut!" Bull ordered, remembering his position as that of the last word of authority in the country. "I have yet to be heard from, you know."

They reached the Death Head with its ugly, yard-square bronze placque of a skull and cross-bones above the door leering down at them. The inner doors were still closed against the swinging bat-wings. Mesita kicked on them as another burst of laughter came from across the street to sting through him like the lash of a whip. Like the storm shutters of the windows, the doors had been backed with sheets of steel that would turn any bullet.

Sweet Ludlow cautiously opened the doors. He was an enormous man, as pink-skinned as a new-born baby and utterly hairless from head to toe. Men who knew him well always referred to him as The Skinned Mule. His popped eyes were huge and china-blue. He closed the doors quickly after Mesita and Judge Bull had stumbled inside, and made it a point to keep his face hidden from the man he had locked out behind them.

"Why didn't you let him in?" Mesita snarled. "If he would come in, hoh, no, Skinned Mule?"

"Quiet, please." Ludlow's voice was that of a woman, and his every gesture was feminine in spite of his huge size and great-baby ugliness. "I have something to tell you. Something you have perhaps forgotten, Mr. Mesita. He—"

"My God, don't stand and talk, Sweet!" the judge cut in. "Give us a drink. Damn it, I'm *dying for a drink!* That smart fool wouldn't have come on inside, anyway."

The saloon was empty. With a swaying stride Ludlow hurried back behind the bar and set out bottles and glasses. Every move had a neat little flip to it. The bar shone as if an industrious housewife had scrubbed and polished it. Mesita and the judge had three drinks while Sweet

Ludlow sipped a cherry soda and stared at them out of his big eyes.

"You started to say someteeng," Mesita reminded him. "Hoh, no, preety wan?"

"About the new man, yes." Ludlow's huge head bobbed in a shining nod. "Perhaps, as I said, you have forgotten. Perhaps you never saw him, but I am certain your brother did. I thought I recognized him from somewhere when he rode in with the sheriff. It troubles me, not being able to place that face. I saw it only twice, on the Mexican border, five years ago. We were down there, you and I, Mr. Mesita, and your brother Juan. This man came from the north—from this country somewhere. Do you remember a name— Oh, how positively stupid of me, gentlemen!" He touched his forehead daintily and frowned. "The name is on the tip of my tongue, right in my mouth—"

"Set up some more ice water!" snapped the judge. "My tonsils are still hot and my belly's on fire!"

"Look!" Ludlow's eyes were suddenly shining like huge blue buttons. "I have it now, Mr. Mesita! Didn't you ever hear your brother speak of the Bitter River Kid?"

"Heem!" Jules Mesita lunged back from the bar as if some one had struck him with a powerful fist. "No, no, thees ees not so! Preety wan, you are a fool!" But Mesita looked scared.

"I never forget a face," humbly bowed Ludlow. "Not in a thousand years. As I said, I saw him only twice, and I think your brother saw him each time I did, but if I had seen him only once I would not forget. No man could forget the face of the Bitter River Kid. It just wasn't done when the Kid was on the border, Mr. Mesita."

"Ze drink!" Mesita hissed, pawing for the bottle with eyes that were suddenly like those of a hunted animal at bay. "*Hace mucho calor. Tengo mucha sed. Si, si, eet ees ver' hot, and I am ver' thirsty.*"

Chapter VI

THE LIAR

PHIL GUNSONG did not know of the discovery that had taken place behind him. Had he been asked about it he could have told any man that he had never heard of the Mesitas on the Mexican Border. A man did not see every face in the crowded night dives, where tobacco smoke—and often gunsmoke—clouded the air. He certainly did not remember ever seeing Juan Mesita's face, but if another name had been given he would have remembered it instantly.

In addition, once he had left it, the Border had become a thing of the past, and the Bitter River Kid was forgotten, as far as he was concerned. He had been younger at the time, slick-faced, in reality a kid bucking up against a proposition older and saner heads would never have undertaken. Texas Rangers had saddled the name of the Bitter River Kid on his back. He had done his job thoroughly; a night prowler who came from nowhere, one who struck swiftly and with lightning certainty. And he left havoc where he struck, and only the furious ring of a tall half-outlaw horse's hoofs singing their dying music to the darkness as he fled like the wolf who had drunk his blood and laughed at the dead behind him.

Mad days and mad nights down there on that bloody Border! A reward of twenty thousand *pesos* on his head kept him on the move; yet there were Rangers above the Border, and honest men below it, who might have collected it a number of times. Some took their lives in their hands to see that it was not collected. When it was over the Bitter River Kid had vanished, and not even the Rangers had known where the bird had flown.

Phil Gunsong had been bucking up against hard luck when he had come over the Montana line. With drought every-

where a job was hard to get. Now, it seemed to him, the cards were falling his way, and the ghost of the Bitter River Kid was again glimmering on his horizon.

Old Doc Wright and four men were already taking care of the dead out back when he walked back into the office of the jail. Gossard McCalley was sitting there behind his desk, with his shoulder bared and an old medicine chest in front of him, while Grace Riddell dressed his wound. There had been more trouble inside the jail, and he had had to go in with the butt of a quirt to rescue the three Death Head men and lock them up in a big cell in the basement.

"Can't blame the boys for wantin' to tear 'em up," he growled. "What's this yo're doin'?" He glowered at the new star Gunsong laid on the desk in front of him. "Passin' it back, are yuh?"

"Thought, maybe," half-smiled Gunsong, "you would like to change your mind about it."

"Yeah?" the sheriff scowled, scratching his head. "Well, when I do I'll be lockin' yuh up, I reckon. No, I don't know nothin' about yuh, except that yuh can fight, know how to shoot an' will shoot, an' I need that kind of a fella around. I want yuh to stick close to the jail. That's one reason I'm keepin' a lot of them roosters locked up who're here. I know my hawg-meat, yuh see. If a pinch comes—well," he waved to the gunlockers and the belts and six-shooters on the wall, "I'll open the door. That's what yuh might call a speculative chance the dudes upstairs are waitin' for. Yuh got along all right with the judge an' Mesita?"

"All right. I got them there without trouble." Gunsong seated himself on the edge of the desk. "But look here. I want the bottom of this thing. What's all this fighting, this killing and bad blood about? Don't you think I need to know it *all* before I start packing a star around on my chest?"

"An' yuh don't know yet, huh?" The sheriff glared at him. "Can't yuh see that the Mesita crowd's takin' over the country? They're not satisfied with two of the best ranches around here, which were Frank's before he was murdered. Frank had loaned money, too. I told yuh he had scads of it. He loaned it to people, asked no interest, an' took pay back when they could pay. Ever'body liked him.

"Juan an' Jules—well," he shrugged and winced from a little stab in his shoulder, "they grabbed up all old paper an' started right in cuttin' at ever'body's throat. Ever'body hated them from the start. They hated ever'body. Bull landed in here a year ahead of 'em, a lawyer lookin' for soft pickins. Him an' Frank didn't gee-haw. Bull an' Frank never admitted it, but them two had met somewhere in the past, an' the meetin' wasn't good. In a year after gettin' here Bull was made judge, appointed when the old one we had died. So," he shrugged and winced again, "that's the whole thing, blood, feud, an' more blood."

"And murder from behind!" put in a voice in the doorway to the porch. "Go on! Tell him all of it! Tell him how Bob and Charley Riddell have been murdered!"

Gunsong eased off the desk, hat in hand as he stared at the girl in black in the doorway. She was the one he had seen crossing the street on the pinto. There was no doubt at all that she was a sister to Grace Riddell, but she was about two years older, slightly taller, and her face was hard. Hard as nails, decided Gunsong. A pretty face but a sullen one.

"I'm Mabel Riddell!" she exclaimed, coming forward with her tall, spurred heels striking the floor harshly. "I know you saw me this morning. When I looked back you were looking at me from the other side of the river. Why don't you lock me up, Uncle Goss? I shot Juan Mesita!"

"Hush!" White-faced, Gossard McCalley was out of his chair and towering over the

desk. "We—we're goin' to have to send yuh off to the crazy house soon, bad as yore mind's gettin' of late, Mabel. Look here," he turned hopelessly to Gunsong, "yuh didn't see her near that kill, didja, Phil?"

"Nobody that even looked like her!" Gunsong lied. "Fact is, I didn't tell you the straight of it. I shot him myself!"

"There, there!" laughed the sheriff with great relief spreading over his face. "Why—why, bust my britches with a belly-band, I knowed it all the time!"

Neither one of them knew that a slouchy, dark-bearded man was listening to every word that was said from just beyond the east window, where he was quietly leaning against the wall.

Chapter VII

PEACE

ODD Job Jingles McGinty carried the news straight to the Death Head. As a saloon swamper, butt-shooter, and Buckskin Bend's all-around inefficiency makeshift, he knew when and how to get a drink, and sometimes several of them.

Doc Wright had had him helping with the dead. The old Indian and the two whites had been brought down from behind the jail. The man McCalley had shot from the roof was unconscious and dying when they picked him up, and the one down by the old blacksmith shop had been dead with a rifle bullet through his heart before he had struck the ground.

Things happened like that these days in the Bend. Not even Jules Mesita would admit that he knew the tall, hawk-faced man who had been shot from the roof. He would not have admitted that Gabe McTavish, the dead man at the corner of the blacksmith shop, had worked for him. Men were cheap. Men were hired, used, and sometimes buried, when they were foolish.

enough to get killed on a little job here and there.

"Both claim to have shot Juan," McGinty explained as he downed two drinks, one right after the other at the bar, and hopefully licked his ever-peeling lips for a third. "Goss had quite a time shuttin' up the gal. Seemed plumb scared. I stayed there, yuh see, until it was over."

"Geeve hecm wan more drink!" Mesita snarled. "No, make eet two, pretty wan."

He sent Judge Bull puffing across the street like a steamboat bucking a swift river current. Men would not shoot a judge, especially if he came among them alone. Judges were something people simply did not shoot. The law was very bitter about such things; it had to protect itself. Bull could reason with the crowd in the Funeral River Bar, even if the men there did despise the sight of him. Bull could bully, too, with a few stout slugs of forty-rod Yellowstone Jack under his belt and somebody to listen to him.

Death Head men had already slipped back to town. Turning their horses over to other gents, who would wait for them in the dense cottonwoods along the river below the big, high flat, they had slipped back up a steep trail to the rear of the Death Head Saloon. A big, stone-walled basement room downstairs made an excellent meeting place for them. All Sweet Ludlow had to do was to lift a board behind the bar and hand down a bottle of whiskey, and the men could drink and wait.

Eyes now as cold and staring as those of a dead fish, Mesita turned and made his way downstairs by an inside flight of narrow stairs. There was a smaller room always kept locked at the head of the basement. Mesita stood there for a moment looking at the silent crowd, and then crooked his finger at a barrel-waisted Mexican with ponderous mustaches and a tall, lean-faced old Oklahoman who had spent many years south of the Border.

Father Time, as the man from Oklahoma was called, and Cabeza Lopez were good men in any pinch. Mesita unlocked the door and had them follow him into an office-like den with an old desk and three chairs in the center of it, and the door was carefully locked behind them.

"Sit down," Mesita ordered in Spanish. "We are here for a purpose. A buckboard will soon be in for Juan's body, eh, no? That is good! On the Death Head under the big oaks in front of the house we will bury him. Juan was always fond of listening to the winds blowing through trees. He will like the spot. I, too, will like it if anything should happen to me. Has any of you forgotten a certain man once called the Bitter River Kid?!"

"Forgot 'im!" Father Time looked up as if Mesita had startled him. "Why, hell-fire an' damnation, no! When he left the Border nobody knowed what had become of 'im. But his work, as some called it, was done. He wiped out the Caballito crowd. The Little Pony fellas. Any particular reason for bringing his name up in our faces, Jules?"

"None," Mesita shrugged, "except—perhaps—to say that he is in town and already wearing a deputy sheriff's badge on his vest."

"No, no, señor, it can't be!" Cabeza Lopez had backed into a chair beside Father Time, but he was out of it now. "It cannot be true. No, no! I heard the true tale of the end of him! It was Gospel truth."

"Yuh heard, maybe," put in Time, "what I an' some others heard. Yuh heard, maybe, that he was caught red-handed out in the sand country an' pegged down over an ant-hill to die at a little bite at a time. That tale was never proved. Nobody knows what happened to him!"

"He is here," Mesita repeated. "Sweet Ludlow does not make mistakes. Move closer. I will tell you about him." Mesita began to whisper.

HIS voice was low after that, but it might have come from a machine gun. At times his eyes seemed to shower sparks of anger. A moment later they would be narrowed and filled with cunning while his lips warped back and forth from snarls to smiles.

"Juan," he explained in his rapid-fire Spanish, "either recognized him or thought he was this Bronc Sparkland that McCalley has been expecting. Neither Juan nor I would wish to see Marshal Sparkland riding into town. That is why all trails are watched."

"An' close-watched," Time nodded. "He won't know me, I reckon, but I never feel easy 'round U. S. deputy marshals. We all managed to dodge him when he passed through before, an' we either dodge or kill 'im this time. He wouldn't haul us up before Judge Bull for a trial, yuh know. He'd drag us east to Forty Mile an' that federal judge there. Me, now, I'd shoot it out before I'd go. But even at that he don't worry me like this Bitter River Kid. He's gun-lucky. Had to be to shoot it out with the Cabillito crowd—an' kill three of their fastest men all goin' for 'im at the same time. That's a Border record nobody'll beat, Jules."

"That, señor," Mesita frowned, "is in the past; as you would say, it is the water over the dam. I am a smart man, as you must know by this time. And sometimes, *when you are smart*, you do things in a smart way. There must be peace between the Death Head and all neighbors."

"Peace?" Cabeza Lopez's eyes widened with surprise. "*Señor Jules*, are you mad?"

"Nope, just crazy as hell!" Time answered hastily. "Here he sets on his haunches, surrounded by the pick triggermen of all the Tex-Mex border country, an'—"

"Quiet!" Mesita snapped. "I do not like to be called a fool when I speak with fools! I have listened too much to Juan in the past. 'Get McCalley out of the way.' That

was his cry. Judge Bull agreed with him. But you see what happens each time a man tries to put McCalley out of the way. Look at today! A man either already dead or dying, and McCalley has a scratch on the shoulder, hoh, no! The man wears a charmed life, I tell you.

"For days there will be quiet." He leaned forward on the desk, eyes intensely bright. "The word will be passed. Death Head men will come to town. They will leave their guns at the office of the jail—"

"In that case," shot in the alarmed Father Time, "I ain't comin' to town nary another time!"

"It will be so with the others," Mesita was going right on. "I will make that clear to McCalley, and he will like it. There will be no insulting back and forth unless it is to be settled with a fist-fight, and we do not like to fight with our hands. I have a very wonderful plan in my mind. Juan said it was too daring, but Juan is gone. I, Jules, his brother, will see to that scheme now. Listen closely."

For ten minutes he talked, eyes widening, narrowing, smiling and glinting. Pale-ness twice shot through the hard old face of Father Time, while Cabeza Lopez sat there, pop-eyed and staring. It was not a pretty picture Jules Mesita was painting for them. Time twice opened his mouth to say that his plan was too daring, too ungodly dangerous. Mesita silenced him with a snarl each time.

"Peace!" the man wound up. "Gentle peace! All men to go where they will! No more quarreling, no more fighting. And then—and then," he added in English, what you call heem ze dynamite she explodes weeth beeg noise, hoh, no!"

"All right." Father Time arose slowly and expelled a long-held breath. "I've got just one time to die. Once, no more! But the trails had better be watched for Bronc Sparkland. If that dude would know Juan, then he'd know yuh, shore as shootin'. An' if he happened to say yore real name ain't

Mesita, the dynamite *would* explode, but it'd be in yore own hip-pocket! Hell, they'd hang every damned one of us!"

"Sí, sí, señor." Mesita's voice was like a gentle purring of some great cat. "*Credo que V. tiene razon.* Yes, yes," he smiled thinly. "I believe you are right!"



THE first rain in many weeks fell the thirteenth day after the shooting spree. Everybody liked the rain, and it was a cause for a general celebration far and near, but nobody liked the quiet that had come over Buckskin Bend and the surrounding rangeland.

Judge Bill Bull had taken things into his own hands. He had lain the peace proposal flatly before Gossard McCalley; had sworn that he would back it up with his life, and declared openly that all his animosity for the sheriff had been flung out the window. He had brought Jules Mesita to the jail. To the pop-eyed surprise of both Gunsong and the sheriff, the man had apologized.

"If I didn't know myself better," the sheriff had growled, when Bull and Mesita had gone their way, "I'd swear I'm drunk, Phil. Mesita was just too *damn* nice. Accent was almost missin', too. I've learned to watch that in him. At times he can overcome it, nearabouts, an' then it'll come windin' out like a snake hiss'n' an' unquillin' right in yore face. Somethin's in the wind. Yuh mark that down an' see. When it hits, it'll knock us off our feet. Wish Bronc Sparkland would get here. Bronc's an awful good smeller when it comes to smellin' things out. I'll swear that fella can see some things better'n a hoot owl can see in the dark!"

The second blow had come the seventh day after the truce. Judge Bill Bull had come puffing his huge belly and a big black cigar into the office of the jail to release every man on bond except the three

Death Head riders. Five men had already been convicted for murder and had taken appeals. Bill Bull knocked the props out from under that with one magnificent sweep of a fat hand.

"New trials granted!" he had chuckled, "and all men released on their own bonds, Goss. That's the orders of the court—my orders! It's the way to keep the peace. Start all over with a clean slate. 'If thy neighbor smites thee on one cheek, turn the other.' That's the Bible for you, my friend, and a man can't go wrong on it. It's God's word, God's law—the best ever written!"

"I-I know," the sheriff had gasped, squashing limply backward in his chair behind the old desk. "But—but you'd better hand me a glass of water. Yore unbounded kindness makes me kinda fainty. Prisoners of mine in the past have professed religion sometimes as much as a week before hangin', but I'll be damned if yuh ain't overshot the dose on me! When did *yuh* start readin' the Bible?"

"At my mother's knee!" the judge had laughed. "Listen to me, Goss McCalley: *'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself; love is the fulfillment of God's law.'*"

"I—I know," the sheriff had agreed. "I just never knowed that yuh knowed, an' I'm powerful glad to find it out, even at this late date. But when yuh go back down the street ask Doc Wright to come up here quick. Tell 'im to bring all his pills an' a thermometer what'll register at least one eighty-eight. My pulse is up to three ninety-nine, an' my temperature's gettin' ready to blow my hat off."



PHIL GUNSONG often walked around as though he were half asleep, but he was far from it. He was not like Gossard McCalley. The sheriff was a fatalist. What would come would come, McCalley guessed. A man would meet it, go

through it like a cannon ball scattering a loose pile of shingles, or just fold up and fade out of the picture.

"I believe my dyin' time's cut out for me," he had told Gunsong. "I'm like the Ayerabs about that. Maybe that it's writ in yore forehead when yo're born, as they say. Smart people, them Ayerabs."

Sunday—a day as quiet as a tomb—had come with the rain. It had been a half-hearted sprinkling at first, then a couple of quick, noisy showers with the clouds breaking. Late in the afternoon the clouds had turned to black soup, and it had come back with a drizzle that held on until darkness settled. Now it was a steady downpour drenching the land, with an occasional streak of lightning sizzling its zig-zagging streak across the sky while the thunder-wagons grew in their intensity in the southwest.

Hanging about the jail day and night made a man lazy. Yet it had been unfolding things for Phil Gunsong. He saw Grace Riddell every day. He saw Mabel Riddell on the average of every other day. Grace's face had changed. Some of the brooding malice had gone out of it, but Mabel Riddell still had hatred ready to burn in her eyes when the name of Mesita was mentioned.

"They killed my brothers," was all she could say. "I know it as well as if I had seen them shot in their backs. I killed one of them, and I'll never rest until the other one is in his grave."

"Mabel's like that," the sheriff growled as he sat there now in the office of the jail, listening to the rain pour down beyond the closed front door and the iron shutters over the windows. "Bull-headed, like Tom Riddell, an' I can't blame her. She knows what I can't prove. Well," he glanced over the long room, "I reckon I might as well pull on my old slicker an' hump it for home. Grace'll be over with yore breakfast as usual in the mornin'."

He moved on to the front door, opened

it and stood there looking out into the blowing night for a moment, with his hands on his back and the light behind him.

"Tell yuh what," he added. "I wish Bronc Sparkland would get here. This quiet's killin' me. Goodnight, Phil."

One hand was on the door to pull it closed behind him when the sudden outburst of shots crashed like striking lightning down the street. Gunsong was on his feet when he saw McCalley reel. The lawman staggered back, turned dazedly, one hand lifting limply to his face, with the shots still whipping the darkness with their angry red ribbons and showering splinters from either side of the door as the bullets struck the jail. The sheriff went down, sliding forward on his right shoulder just as Gunsong slapped out the light.

"I knowed!" McCalley's pained voice was a mutter above the noise of the shooting. "It was too good to last. Carry on, Phil."

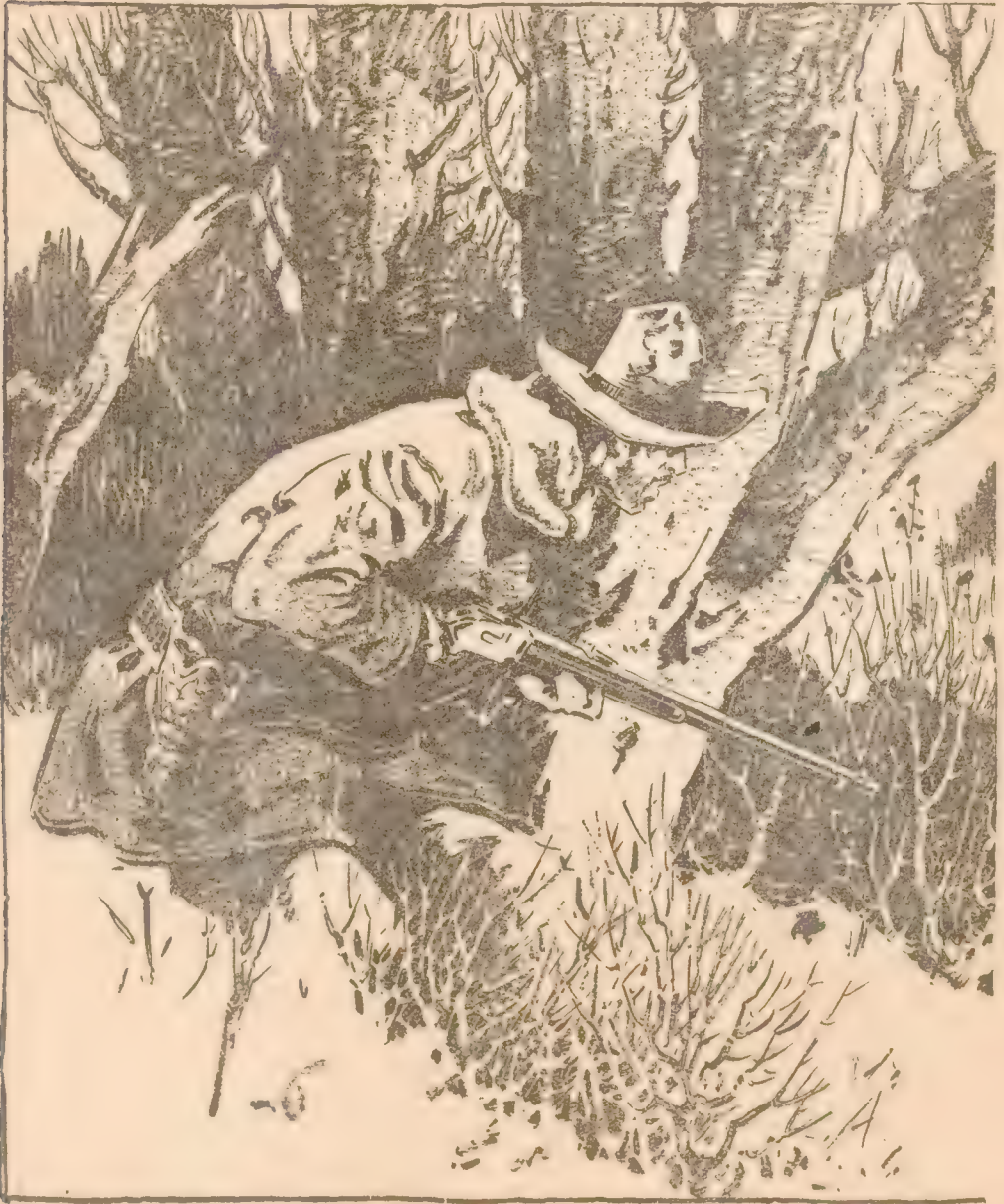
It was then that a tremendous explosion seemed to shake the world. Gunsong was flung to the floor, atop of the sheriff. One wild yell of terror came from inside the jail. The whole building seemed to leave the ground in one skyward jump. A buckling, jumping and twisting thing, it was like something going to pieces in the air. Weapons from the walls and the gunlockers came rattling down on the floor. Falling plaster and timbers followed them, and a poisonous gray smoke seemed to boil in from everywhere as if it was swallowing the entire world in its billowing maw.

All Buckskin Bend started going crazy at once, and the six men who had been hiding behind jail stables were moving forward swiftly in the darkness and pouring rain to finish their tasks. Shots were still gashing through the darkness down the street, but no bullets were now raking the front of the jail. Slugs were being fired at lighted windows and every opening door. Buckskin Bend was being held at

(Continued on page 136)

Over the Hill to Hell

By GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN



Of the six men who left Mears' Trading Post on the search for gold in the fall of '75, only one came back—with new-found riches that bore the indelible stain of hideous murder. . . .

Packer followed and shot him, then carried his body back to the camp.

TWO miles below Lake San Christobal, on the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River, in Colorado, are five weather-beaten, red spruce posts. They

mark the spot where fire men were killed in one of the most brutal mass murders in Western history. Here Dead Man's Gulch, a barren gorge from the south, breaks into the valley of the Gunnison just below the yellow, slimy slope of Slumgullion.

The names printed on the posts have long since been washed out by spring blizzards and summer rains. The bare, unmarked poles are the only headstones for the five graves that dot the site of the tragedy.

In the late fall of 1875, five prospectors stopped at Otto Mears' Trading Post, then situated at the point where Saguache Creek flows out into the San Luis Valley. These men were on their way into the Ute country in search of the source of the placer gold that had been found on the Uncompahgre and San Juan rivers.

At this time a trapper by the name of Al Packer, who professed to have lived many years among the Ute tribes, had been loafing around the post for several weeks. The money he had received from his previous winter's trapping had been spent in a drunken debauch. He was trying to get the post trader to extend credit for another year.

When the prospectors arrived and inquired for a guide into the Five Rivers country, later known as the Silver San Juan, Mears told them of Al Packer. While he did not give the trapper any great recommendation, he said Packer ought to know the country, and that after he got away from whiskey, he might be able to guide them over the trails that had been made by the Indians on their annual hunting trips into the Tomichi Valley.

Packer agreed to take them to the head of the Uncompahgre River for a hundred dollars. He wanted his pay in advance, but the adventurers, acting on Mears' advice, refused to give him this. The prospectors had plenty of money, which they spent freely at the post, replenishing their supply of grub and ammunition.

Owing to the fact that the season was late, and horses or mules might starve in the high mountains, the trip was made on foot.

Nothing more was heard of the party after they left Mears' Post, until late the following winter, when Packer returned with a weird story of starvation and death. He told Mears that one of the men had fallen sick, and that the party had camped for several days on the mesa below Lake San Christobal, a short distance from the main north-and-south Indian highway. Here, according to Packer, a terrific snow-storm had caught them and they had been unable to either go on or return to the post, although several attempts were made. Having no tools but their belt hatchets, they had not been unable to hew out boards for skis; nor could they find any elk or deer, the hides of which might have been used for web snowshoes. Packer said that the five prospectors had died of starvation and the cold.

At first Mears thought little about Packer's story, as such tragedies frequently happened to pioneer parties attempting to cross the Continental Divide at that time of year. After a while, however, he noticed that Packer had plenty of money. He not only drank to excess but lost large sums to other trappers in poker games. Mears became suspicious, and when the snow went off in the spring, he sent a halfbreed tracker to investigate.

The man returned, saying that he had found the camp and portions of the bodies of all five prospectors. Their heads had been split open with an axe. There was evidence that they had been killed in their sleep. Portions of one of the bodies had been cut away, and the partially burned bones were found in the ashes about the campfire.

In some manner Packer learned of Mears' suspicion, and he disappeared. It was a month or more before the details

(Continued on page 132)

DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

The man, a well-known explorer and geographer, tells how he found these strange methods in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. He discloses how he learned rare wisdom and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which enabled many to perform amazing feats. He maintains that these immense powers are latent in all of us, and that methods for using them are now simplified so that they can be used by almost any person with ordinary intelligence.

He maintains that man, instead of being limited by a one-man-power mind, has within him the mind-power of a thousand men or more as well as the energy-power of the universe which can be used in his daily affairs. He states that this sleeping giant of



mind-power, when awakened, can make man capable of surprising accomplishments, from the prolonging of youth, to success in many fields. To that eternal question, "Do we have to die?" his answer is astounding.

The author states the time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world, and offers to send his amazing 9,000-word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 178E, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 130)

could be verified and an officer sent into the territory to look for the suspected murderer. He traced Packer through the small Mexican Plazas along the Upper Rio Grande, as far south as Albuquerque. Here the trail seemed to end. It was impossible to determine whether Packer had gone down the Rio Grande to the Mexican Border or followed the California trail west. Apparently he had escaped.

Four years later Packer was seen in El Paso. Colorado officers were notified and they brought him back to Lake City, the county seat of Hinsdale County. His was the first important murder trial under the laws of the newly admitted state.

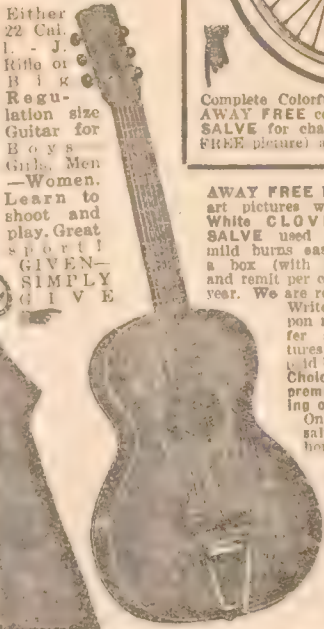
Before leaving El Paso, Packer had confessed that he had murdered the men and eaten their flesh. When it came to the trial he told a different story. He said that the men, crazed by hunger, had killed one another, while he was away hunting, in an effort to get food for the party. This evidence was proved to be incorrect by several mountain men, prominent among whom was "Bear Jim" Harbison, who testified that there was an abundance of game to be found all winter along the Lake Fork. He said that the stream was lined with beaver ponds, and the south side of the mountains was the home of numerous bands of Big Horn.

Under cross-examination Harbison became angry and secured permission from the court to reconstruct the scene of the murder, from the signs he had found when he visited the camp. "Only four of these men were killed in their sleep," were his startling words to the court. "What really happened was, Packer pretended to go away on some errand, probably to find a trail or an Indian camp. He returned in the night and killed four of the men. The fifth one was aroused by the noise and sprang to his feet, but was so horrified by

(Concluded on page 134)

CHOICE OF CASH COMMISSION

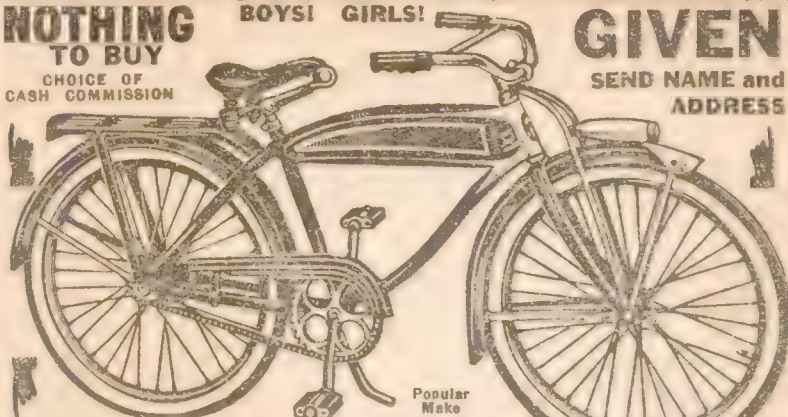
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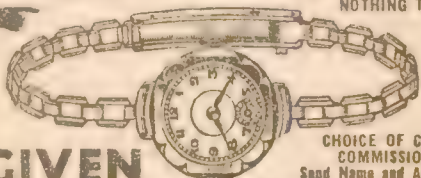
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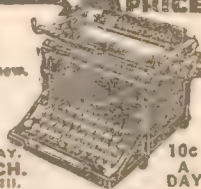
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 132)

what he saw that he tried to run. Packer followed and shot him, then carried his body back to the camp and mutilated it in an effort to destroy the evidence of how he had been killed. Whether Packer actually ate his flesh, I'm unable to say, but if he did, it was because he was either too lazy to go on the hill and kill mountain sheep, or because he was a natural cannibal."

The court room was in an uproar when Harbison finished drawing his picture. In order to quiet the crowd, the judge declared a recess until afternoon, at which time Packer's lawyer made a strong argument in defense of his client. He claimed that Harbison was a wild trapper, prejudiced by what he had seen among the savage tribes, and not to be credited. Nevertheless, Packer was convicted of murder, and sentenced to be hanged.

Packer was kept in jail in Lake City, awaiting the date of his hanging. A woman journalist, on a Denver paper, began an agitation for a new trial, claiming that the evidence had been wholly circumstantial.

At the second trial Packer was again convicted, this time of manslaughter. He was finally sentenced to life in the State Penitentiary. A few years later the sentimental reaction of newcomers to the State, who knew nothing about the early conditions, again stirred matters up, and tried to get Packer paroled.

The person who successfully blocked all such attempts was Otto Mears, the trader, who had known from the first all about Packer's murderous tendencies. Mears had now become a powerful man in the State. He had pioneered the way for the Rio Grande Railroad, which was building into the mining camps of the San Juan, and had a great deal of influence with prominent people. He succeeded in blocking all attempts to free Packer, who died in Canyon City in the late '90's.

FORTUNE IN CASH PAID FOR OLD MONEY



HIS "LAST DIME," yet if that dime was of the year 1894 with a mint mark "S" Max Mehl, the Texas Money King, would have paid him \$100.00 for it. He could have been dining on steak instead of coffee and doughnuts.



COINS WORTH FORTUNES may pass through your hands unnoticed, if you do not know how to recognize them. Mrs. Harvey, wife of a Fulton Mo. farmer was paid \$140.00 for three small coins which she obtained as part payment for some produce.



IT PAYS TO BE POSTED—the owner of a number of \$5.00 and \$10.00 notes of the Kirtland (Ohio) Safety Society Bank was about to burn them, but hearing of Max Mehl, sent them to him and it was discovered they bore the signature of Joseph Smith, the late founder of the Mormon Church. They were, therefore, of considerable value.



ONE OF THE LARGEST TRANSACTIONS in the history of coins was the purchase by B. Max Mehl, the Texas Money King, of 832 copper cents from Dr. George P. French, of Rochester, for \$50,000.00. Above is shown a newspaper picture of B. Max Mehl handing over the check. The coin illustrated is one of the pennies dated 1793. Three of these were valued at \$5,000.00.



VALUABLE COINS turn up in the most unexpected places! A ticket seller on the Brooklyn Bridge took in a half dollar for which he later received \$800.00. It pays to watch your coins!



B. MAX MEHL, one of the world's greatest authorities on old money, during the past 42 years has bought hundreds of thousands of coins and has paid big cash, premiums for them.



Today or tomorrow a valuable coin may come into your possession. There are also old bills and stamps worth fortunes. Learn how to know their value. An old 10 stamp found in a basket was recently sold for \$10,000.00.



There are single pennies that sell for a hundred dollars; nickels worth many dollars; dimes, quarters, half-dollars and dollars on which we will pay BIG CASH PREMIUMS. Many of these coins may now be passing from hand to hand. Max Mehl will pay up to \$25.00 for United States quarters minted as late as 1901 at the San Francisco Mint; and for a nickel as recent as a 1926 S. Mint, he will pay up to \$2.50; a dime of 1916 D. Mint will bring up to \$2.00, showing that even a number of recent coins are worth many times their face value. Knowing about coins pays — Andrew Henry of Idaho was paid \$900.00 for one-half dollar received in change.

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GUN SONG AT FUNERAL RIVER

black handkerchiefs in their mouths.
 "Awright, get agoin'," Father Time snarled.

Only five men rode away with the prisoners. A man rode at either side of each victim, and the fifth man took the lead, spurring and quirting his horse furiously. Soon the rain was hiding them, and in the darkness they were heading to the northwest. . . .

The jail was already a great, lolling tongue of flame before the shooting let up. One after another, the men of Buckskin Bend ventured into the street, then strung out in a line toward the jail. The old brass bell started ringing on the little volunteer fire department's hose-house behind the Funeral River Bar.

"Hotter'n hell in there!" a man cried after kicking in the front door. "Look! Just this side of the fire! There's a man in them flames! *A man on the floor!*"

"Back, yuh damned fool!" half-screamed another man. "Yuh can't go in there! It's death, I tell yuh! Good God, it looks like the ceilin's already startin' to cave in!"

"It's Goss!" cried another man.

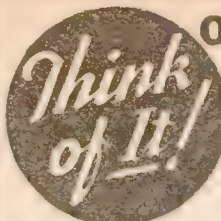
"Keep back!" bawled the voice of Judge Bull.

"Get a rope!" yelled another man. "Maybe we can rope 'im an' drag 'im outa there! No man can stand that heat!"

"Think of Mr. Gunsong!" Bull was bawling again. "He is in there somewhere, gentlemen! Then think of those Death Head riders. All human beings being roasted to death! Wait, woman! Where the hell did you come from?"

She had come out of the night, a tall, strong woman with yellow hair. Even as she appeared she was stumbling and holding a bloody towel to her head. Before any one could halt her she had brushed the men aside. At the door the heat seemed to knock her down. On her hands and knees she went forward.

On, on! It was like a thousand miles



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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

through blazing and crackling hell. They saw her reach Gossard McCalley's limp figure on the burning floor. She dropped half across him, and it looked as though she would never get up again. They saw a burning blade of fire light in her hair, saw it singe it and turn the ends of her hair to brown dust. Then she was fighting to her hands and knees again and trying to crawl back to the burning door as she dragged Gossard McCalley with her.

"Stand clear!" The voice came thundering like a shot out of the night, and a tall, dripping-wet man flung himself forward. "Stand clear!"

"It's Gunsong!" a voice yelled. "Gunsong!"

Whipping his wet coat up over his head, he dived into the flames. They saw him go down. He was like a Biblical Paul in the furnace, on his hands and knees, burning debris falling about him, some of it lighting on his hands. In the terrible heat he reached the man and woman. Then came the thousand-mile journey back to the door. In a splintering rain of fire and more falling plaster, he reached the hot porch.

"That was into hell an' out!" a man cried. "Plain hell!"

"Yuh bet!" yelled another voice in frantic glee. "An' that's Mary Mesita who saved her brother."

Chapter VIII

SIX-SHOOTERS FOR TWO

THE explosion had blown open the shutters of the east window. Dazed, blinded and choked by the dust and smoke, and with wreckage still raining over him from overhead, Gunsong had stumbled to the window. In a head-first plunge he had gone outside, landing in the mud and water.

Half-conscious when he had started to

GUN SONG AT FUNERAL RIVER

move, he had staggered on to the rear of the jail. It was all wreckage back there where a full case of dynamite had been exploded against the wall. The back door had been blown completely away. The torn and mangled bodies of Rube Rye and Pride Fallon were in the first cell. Rye and Fallon had been asleep, and they had received the full force of the charge. A groan had come to Gunsong from another cell, and he had found Windy Trigg lying on the floor with both legs broken and blood oozing from his mouth. Gunsong dragged him outside.

"They would kill us, damn 'em!" the man had sobbed as soon as consciousness started returning. "Killin' us would make it look like somebody besides the Death Head bunch had done the job. Now, hang their bloody souls, I'll tell—tell every damned thing I know about that murderin' Francisco Leon!"

"They was only distant cousins to Frank Mesita," Trigg had gone on. "I'm dyin'. I know it, an' I don't care what I tell on 'em. They did kill the gals' brothers. They had Frank Mesita killed, too. Judge Bull worked out that plan. His name was Bull Yardley on the Border. . ."

Now, standing in the rain after he had rescued the sheriff and his sister, many things were running through Phil Gunsong's mind. Two hose-lines had been brought up, and great streams of water were at last being poured in on the fire to bring it under control.

"An amazing display of heroism, Philip!" Judge Bull's big right hand suddenly fell on Gunsong's shoulder.

"I suppose," Gunsong looked coldly at the man's face, "you're looking for votes now?"

"Why—why, no, I—"

It was as far as he got. Phil Gunsong suddenly caught him by the arm with one hand and by the collar with the other.

"You're under arrest, Bull!" he snapped.

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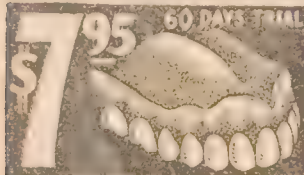
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

"When that fire's put out there'll still be a number of cells left. If you start a squawk I'll tell this crowd your name used to be Yardley!"

"Get your damn hands off of me!" the judge snarled.

"All right, you asked for it!" Gunsong drove one solid blow to the man's chin, and flopped him backward in the mud. "Grab hold of him, some of you men. I'll let the crowd judge the judge later."

The sheriff and his sister had been carried on down the street to Doc Wright's office. Now Gunsong sent men behind the jail to bring Windy Trigg down the street.

Gossard McCalley had stopped lead no less than four times. Some of his hair was burned off, but life was returning to him when Gunsong reached the doctor's office. Goss would live.

"My time-ticket ain't up yet, I reckon, Phil." He tried to smile as he glanced at Gunsong. "How's Mary? Somebody said she come to the jail, an' yuh an' her dragged me out."

"Mary's a McCalley, Goss!" It was Doc Wright who answered the man. "She has an ugly bullet rake through the scalp, and another one just below the left shoulder blade. They thought, of course, that they had left her dead on the floor. She has just told me about it. Five men sneaked into her house, and ran off with Grace and Mabel."

"Don't think I'd let that jar me, gents." A tall man stepped forward from the crowd. He was dog-dirty, hump-shouldered and baggily dressed in the lowest possible order of a sheepherder. His gray-streaked brown hair had not been cut for weeks.

"Well, I'll be damned!" groaned the sheriff. "In that get-up I wouldn't know the devil, himself. That's Bronc Sparkland, Phil. . . ."

Tension could kill a man. Jules Mesita decided that before midnight. He paced

GUN SONG AT FUNERAL RIVER

the great living room out at the Death Head, listening to the rain pour down in ever-increasing floods. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

No trail would be left anywhere on a night like this. He had pointed that out to his men. No one would be able to prove a thing. As fast as they had come in he had sent them on to the bunkhouse with orders to rub the saddle marks from the backs of their horses.

"And have them hang out their saddles," he had told Cabeza Lopez. "On the pegs under the leaky side of the bunkhouse, where they will remain wet."

"But they do not like this thing," the Mexican had complained.

"Look at me, stomach of the pig!" Mesita had collared the man, and his hot Spanish was like the overflowing of a volcano. "Bull said they must go, those foolish yellow-heads. Who knows but what they might find a smart lawyer to look much closer into this thing? There is nothing any one can do to us for this night's work."

Odd Job Jingles McGinty came at two o'clock in the morning.

"A whole crowd's comin', Jules!" McGinty said quickly, standing there, dripping, in the great living room. "They've whipped Judge Bull's pants off. Hung him across a hitchrack an' wore out a quirt on 'im, then they threw 'im in jail. The fire's out, an' men are standin' on guard with Winchesters all around it. That Gun-song fella's strictly hell."

"Gunsong?" Mesita's eyes widened. "He—he was not—not hurt?"

"Shook up some, I think, but that's all. Listen!"

The split-splattering sounds of hoofs were in the night now. Jules Mesita walked to the front door and threw it open. Horsemen churned up to the front porch. Others rode around to the back of the house, and others moved on to the corrals.

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Geet down and come een!" Mesita called.

Nobody answered him. He heard men down at the bunkhouse, and a wet rider came galloping up from that direction.

"All Death Headers seem to be accounted for!" the man announced.

Phil Gunsong swung off a tall horse. Thumbs hooked over the broad buckles of his gunbelts, he seemed to stroll forward. He came on, and stopped a yard away.

"You knew we would come, I guess?"

"But, Señor Gunsong, eet ees—"

"Don't say it!" Gunsong was laughing now, and only a fool could have seen anything to laugh about. "If you would like to have a raincoat, you'd better get it!"

(Continued on page 144)

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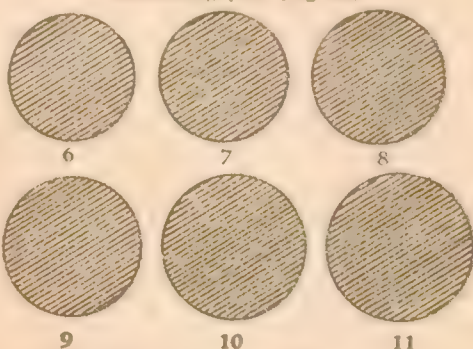
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 142)

"Ees—ees there something wrong?"

"Sure, he ain't lyin'." A man who looked like a sheepherder had come forward, dog-dirty and grinning through his beard. "Yuh remember me, don't yuh? I saw yuh about ten days ago, up near the old Little Horn Mine. Yuh said somethin' about the country not bein' healthy for my kind when I told yuh I was just passin' through. I lied to yuh. My name's Sparkland, deputy U. S. marshal, Mr. Francisco Leon."

Gunfire broke out at that moment. It was the deadly drum of a .45, followed by a yell, an oath, and then the sound of gunfire in the direction of the bunkhouse. Jules Francisco Leon jumped backward like a wolf trying to clear a trap. His hands made one downward motion for his six-shooters, but they were not quick enough. Gunsong's right fist smashed straight to the point of his chin. He went backward.

"The next time, Leon," Gunsong's voice was low and deadly, "I'll use a gun."

Leon turned his head, looking at him as the gunfire in the direction of the bunkhouse died away.

"We got the girls back," the man was saying. "No trouble. Hood Johnson and several others have been watching that mine since Bronc Sparkland saw you around it. Your men had no more than left the mine before Johnson and two Windmill riders had knocked over your two guards and were heading back to town with the girls. Get up and let's get going. Everybody's

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waiting to hang you in Buckskin Bend. Your friend Bull, alias Yardley, told us a lot about you."

"Si, si!" Slowly, as if a quick move might mean disaster, the man on the floor arose. "I weel get my coat." He looked a little pitiful.

He wanted to get to the table. Once beyond it he would go down fighting. Any death would be better than going into town and meeting the mob that would be waiting for him there. He took a step forward, and halted with a jerk as the door from the kitchen swung open.

"E-ek!" he squeaked. "Eet ees you, hoh, no! Hoh, no! No! no!" His voice lifted to a scream. "Eet ees not you!"

"Mabel!" Gunsong bawled. "Don't!"

"Reach for them, you rat!" the girl cried, eyes glittering.

"Mabel! Mabel!" roared Gunsong again. "You fool, he'll kill—"

Leather slapped at that moment. Leon had swerved like lightning to the left. His hands had shot downward. A six-shooter was in his right one when a .45 in the girl's hand tore him off his feet, crashed him against the table, and pitched him face-first to the floor, a slug in his brain.

"All right, Phil!" The girl now leaned back against the wall. "I've done what I said I would."

"Three cheers for Mabel!"

The crowd was roaring behind him when Gunsong moved forward, big guns slowly rocking at his hips. Before he reached the girl the door flung open behind her. Grace Riddell leaped into the room.

"I tried to overtake her, Phil!" she cried, slinging water from her clothing in all directions. "Mabel, you're crazy! You murdered him!"

"No, she didn't!" Phil Gunsong put his arms around both of them. "If you ask me, she's a sixgun queen. She beat him on the draw."

And then, without asking anybody's permission, he repeatedly kissed them both.

THE END

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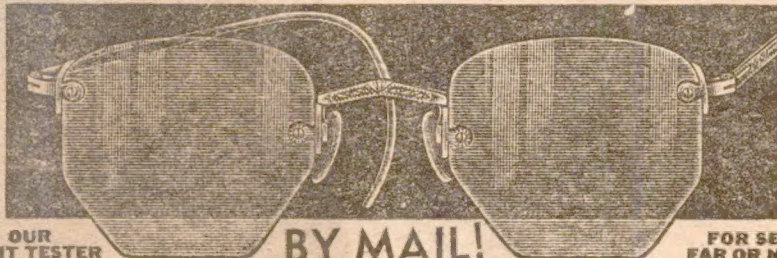
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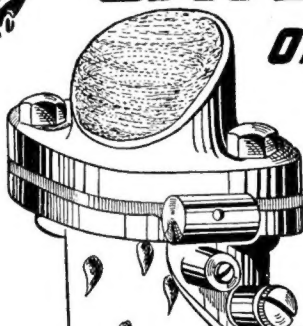
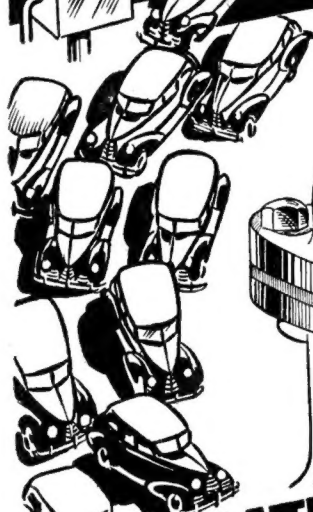
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